

What was I thinking?

February 6, 2022



Psalms for all seasons

January was a long and busy month. I always think it's going to be a relatively easy time after Advent and Christmas, but, among other things, there are annual reports due. Writing them is time consuming, but the process and the finished product are rewarding. It's nice to look back over the last year and see all the things we've accomplished, even some that we forgot about. The last year was a particularly challenging one for all of us, so it was nice to see the good things that happened.

At any rate, I'm getting back to writing what I hope will be weekly articles again. The last Sunday in January was youth Sunday, and it was great to have the service led by our thoughtful and creative youth. One of the lessons for that day was Psalm 42, which was both read and sung. It's one of many psalms I find particularly moving:

As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.
My soul thirst for God, for the living God.

It includes some painfully honest words of lament: "My tears have been my food day and night." Most of us have been through some kind of difficult time in our lives, and the present time seems to be difficult for all of us. For many, those times cause us to

lose sleep. We lie awake, troubled by what is on our minds and in our hearts. Sometimes the tears come.

Like many of us, the psalmist reflects on better days:

how I went with the throng
and led them in procession to the house of God,
with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving.

As a church musician, part of my vocation is leading people into the house of God with songs of thanksgiving. We all have good memories of joyful celebrations in our church, and it's easy to ask, "Do you remember when?" For the psalmist, the pleasant memory quickly fades and troubled thoughts return:

Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you disquieted within me?

I say to God, my rock, "Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I walk about mournfully because the enemy oppresses me?"

Yet the psalmist doesn't give up. In God there is hope.

The psalms contain ancient words, yet they are still relevant. Ambrose said the psalms are the "voice of the church." In his book *Te Deum: The Church and Music*, Lutheran pastor and musician Paul Westermeyer wrote, "In the Psalms we deal with the height and depth of human life, articulated in a most compelling way. We see our struggles against the backdrop of God's goodness and mercy – our struggles with God and God's struggles with us in steadfast love and faithfulness."

I'm reading a devotional book by Barbara Cawthorne Crafton who is often the chaplain for the Sewanee Church Music Conference, which I attend. The book is *Meditations on the Psalms For Every Day of the Year*. "Mother Barbara," as we call her, wrote this about the psalms:

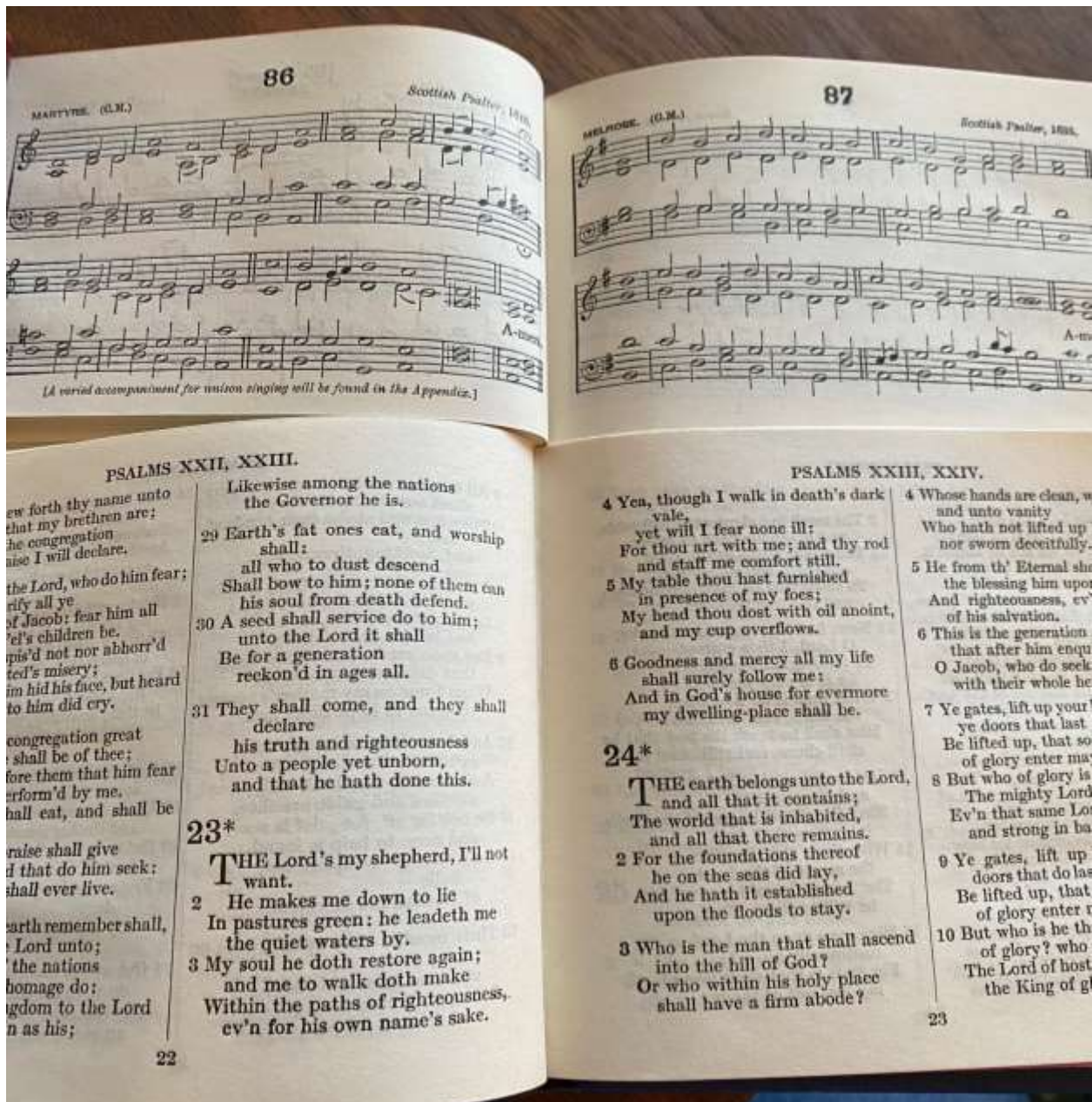
The people who wrote the psalms were not magical or unnaturally good. They were not special – at least, no more special than you are. They were just people trying to make sense of their world and their own souls, as we try to make sense of ours. So we hear them complaining, rejoicing, wondering at the beauty of the world and at the annoying habits of their neighbors, green with envy and pale with fear, trusting sometimes and doubting others. Don't make them better than they were. You'll miss a lot.

One of the recent devotions was on the familiar Psalm 23, which may be the most well-known psalm of all. When it is read at funerals and memorial services, it's often said by everyone present, from memory. It brings us great comfort.

Barbara writes that many scholars believe the word "comfort" does not mean what we think. We think of comfort as someone offering calming words, an arm around the shoulder, and generally being consoled. But Barbara writes:

Nope. Look at the verse again, what is it that "comforts" the psalmist? A rod and a staff. A big stick. Think about it for a minute; you don't stroke somebody gently with a big stick. You prod with a stick. A shepherd uses his staff to prod and push the sheep, to keep them going where they're supposed to go and prevent them from going where they shouldn't.

She explains that the word "comfort" has an older meaning that's not like our modern English. *Com* – (with) and *fortis* (strong). With strength, to strengthen, to make strong, or to push forward toward a destination, to empower in order to reach a goal.



Psalm 23 from *The Scottish Psalter 1929*.

This is one book, not two, as it may appear. The pages are split between top and bottom, with tunes on top and texts on the bottom, so texts and tunes can be interchangeable.

The last two years have been very difficult for all of us, and our difficult time is not over, as much as we want it to be. It's not that simple. As Winston Churchill said, "If you're going through hell, keep going." I believe we are right now. We're walking through the valley of the shadow of death. Sometimes it's tempting to say we can't go on and to give up, but the Good Shepherd kindly yet firmly keeps us moving and gives us strength. I believe that staff is also there to protect us when we need it. A shepherd's staff is also used to defend the sheep against dangerous predators.

Believing in and trusting God doesn't guarantee us an easy time with no troubles. If that was the case, why would there be anything written about God comforting us in times of trouble? If there were no troubled times, many of our psalms would not have been written. There would be no "Why are you cast down, O my soul?" or "Why have you forgotten me?" or "My tears have been my food day and night." Jesus would not have said, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Psalm 22:1).

The psalms were the hymns of the Hebrew people, and many hymn writers have drawn from them. This Sunday we will sing two familiar hymns that are favorites of mine. *Praise Ye the Lord, the Almighty* draws from Psalm 150 and Psalm 103:1-6. *If Thou but Trust in God to Guide Thee* is based on Psalm 55:22: "Cast your burden on the Lord, and he will sustain you; he will never permit the righteous to be moved." It's doesn't say if we trust in God, there will be no burdens, it says God will sustain us.

Read the psalms in your personal devotion, and don't just read the "warm and fuzzy" ones that make you feel happy. Read the difficult, angry, ranting ones. Read or better yet sing them when you come to church. The better you know them, the more often you'll recognize them when they're referred to in the hymns we sing. If you follow the example of Jesus, you can call on them in your darkest hours: "My God, my God, why have your forsaken me?"

If you need some help, I highly recommend Mother Barbara's book.

Soli Deo Gloria (to God alone be the glory),

John