

Jan 15, 2023
Summerland United Church
Spiritual Affective Disorder: Soothe a Savage

During this worship series, we are exploring how our everyday activities can become spiritual practices that bring more light and meaning to our lives. The 17th century poet and playwright, William Congreve, originated the saying, "Music hath the charms to soothe a savage breast" (often misquoted as "beast") The full quote is "Music hath the charms to soothe a savage breast often rocks or bend a knotted oak."

Indeed, music is known to have a powerful effect on our moods with its ability to literally "move" us. The Psalmist proclaims that God can give us a new song, bringing us out of a "miry bog." Today we affirm that attention to our music "playlists" can offer a transformative daily spiritual practice.

Scripture

Psalm 40 The Inclusive Bible

Reflection Soothe

The Psalms are for singing. They are songs full of poetry, illustrations of life and emotions that we are not meant to read literally. When we read them without music, we can often miss the feeling, the heart present in the psalms. And we hear different ideas and themes when we read words than when we sing them. Which is why we did both today.

The hymn is only the first 11 verses of the Psalm. Generally, when we read this psalm, we only read the first 11 lines and stop when we get to "*Let your kindness and faithfulness constantly protect me.*" We do this because the rest of the passage is one of deep lament and accusation and it makes us a little squeamish.

None of us are comfortable with the psalmist shouting out to God demanding shame and confusion on all who seek to destroy them. No one wants to believe in a God who would heap disgrace on those who enjoy another's misfortune because the writer of this psalm is crying out for it.

I decided to have us hear the full psalm today for a few reasons.

Again, as I said at the start this is poetry, making use of metaphor and embellishment to help us to understand both the lament and thanksgiving the psalmist wants us to feel.

I'm sure there have been times in our lives when we've been so angry, so upset by something, or so hurt by the actions of others we say, "I could just kill someone right now." I doubt we really meant it. But we wanted others to understand just how profoundly we've been hurt and those are the words we chose.

In the midst of great distress, I'm sure we've wished worse things than a heap of disgrace on people who have hurt us. Hyperbole, exaggeration and embellishment help us express our emotions and truly understand what is felt.

When we hear the full psalm, we also experience the tension between the writers struggles in life and God's relief. In the first lines the writer is crying for help, and God pulls them from the pit, the mud and quicksand.

Then in lines 13 – 17 we experience this tension three more times.

Misfortunes surround me... my courage is drained...
Then...
Hurry come rescue me!

Heap disgrace on those who enjoy my misfortune...
Then...
May there be joy and gladness in all who seek you

Now I am poor and needy...
Then...
You are my helper and deliverer.

Our lives are like this aren't they? There is a constant back and forth and up and down. Times of trouble and trial, followed by times of solace and joy. Daily life is full of little troubles and little joys. Daily life is also full of overwhelming grief and abundant thanksgiving at times.

We hear the truth of life when we are in the fullness of the psalm. When we let ourselves feel the discomfort and squeamishness of a person who is in deep lament, we also feel the immense thanksgiving when God lifts them up.

The psalmist writes at the beginning -*Unyielding I called to you* or in as in the hymn, *I waited patiently for you God*, which lets us know that the writer has experienced this up and down before, (*haven't we all?*), and they believe and know that God has already established this pattern of relief from trial. The writer, knowing this, calls again to God, knowing that God's faithfulness to humanity will bring rescue.

In fact, the psalmist believes this so strongly that they tell everyone – they announce it to the great assembly. They tell all their friends of God's justice, God's generosity, love, saving actions and God's faithfulness.

God's Faithfulness.

So often we read passages in the bible how we need to be faithful to God. We need to have faith in God. How beautiful it is to me that God is as equally faithful to us, has faith in us.

That kinda makes me want to stand up a little taller, a little more confidently. Huh? It makes it a little easier to face the day knowing this.

And that's what we're looking for these days isn't it? Small things that shine a little more light into our lives.

In 2013 I experienced a mental health breakdown. I had an experience that left me deep in depression and I spent many days in tears unable to get out of bed. I was in the pit of destruction, stuck in the mud and quicksand. Its an awful place to be and I couldn't pull myself out alone.

I began some very intensive therapy with an amazing trauma councilor who's favorite word was Soothe. She regularly encouraged me to find simple and easy practices, or tools, that I could use to soothe myself when the anxiety ran high. She got me to come up with ways of creating comforting and soothing places in my home and within my imagination where I could retreat and take care of myself when the depression took all my energy.

One of those practices was to listen to music that soothed me. Music that is beautiful and peaceful and can help me relax. I hadn't thought about being intentional about my music choices, but once it was suggested to me, it made perfect sense. I could immediately think of a half dozen songs I would put on a playlist for soothing my savage beast.

And that's often the case with simple spiritual practices, we need them to pointed out to us before we remember them and know their potential.

The psalmist writes – *you have put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to you.* And we are reminded of song and music bringing beauty and comfort to us and to all creation. And even when the writer suffers, when they think how their misfortunes number more than the hair on their heads, they continue to sing the praise of God. They don't ask God to take away the misfortunes or bring an end to their suffering. The writer is self-aware enough to know that's not how life works.

Living in this world. Truly living a full life in this world brings suffering, there's no getting around that and the writer accepts it, knowing that regardless God faithfulness to humanity will mean an eventual deliverance from that suffering, at least for a while.

When we look around our community of faith, here in Summerland it is safe to say that here in this room, in our great assembly there are people who today are full of an abundance of joy and happiness, while at the very same time there are people who are

deep in grief and hardship. Thanksgiving and lament exist today here in the community as they often do simultaneously in our hearts.

I like to believe that when the psalmist wouldn't keep their mouth shut about God's love they also shared that they found that love in midst of hardship. I want to believe they were honest with their emotions and though the others may have felt squeamish when they shared the hard emotions, the great assembly held those feelings close and with respect as God does. They helped to soothe the savage beast, as God does.

The psalmist bears a faithful witness to others, sharing how their faith in God helped them. Perhaps this knowledge shared will help another?

And as the ever-faithful God is always here to soothe and to comfort all of us, the great assembly was ever faithful as well. Together they raised a new song in their mouths, helped set each other's feet on rocks and held each other's steps firmly.

and while music doth soothe the savage so do communities that hold all it's members – regardless of their mental and emotional states- with care and respect. We bring soothing comfort to each other and that is worthy of song and praise.

May it be so.

Amen.