

## **Redemption Song<sup>1</sup>**

November 13, 2016

My primary and only text today is a Psalm.

Psalm 98

It is one of the lectionary texts for this Sunday and it seemed at first like a fine choice for the dedication of new space, the completion of our renovation

and it still is a fine choice for that purpose

Sing to the Lord a new song for God has done marvelous things.

Sing to the Lord, Bless God's name.

Tell of God's salvation from day to day.....

As we move around the building with more elbow room,  
as we wander among people in the lobby, deepening our connections  
with one another,  
as we gather around meetings and food at the beautiful table out there,  
as we enjoy the easier flow of people,  
the new ramp and the washrooms that mean we've decreased the  
barriers that used to be there,  
as we participate in new possibilities of new gatherings in new office  
and meeting spaces,  
we can rejoice and sing a new song to our God who does marvelous  
things and pray that God will bless all of this for God's work of peace  
and justice in our urban context.

---

<sup>1</sup> © Marilyn Zehr, 2016.

For this is what we have been called to here at 1774 Queen Street East.

While I've said that Psalm 98 is a fine Psalm for our celebration much of the week I found myself drawn to different Psalms within the Psalter,

This 2400-3000 year old songbook offers us an amazing collection of prayers that are raw, real, and unflinching in the way they express the depths of human emotion and experiences of God.

And Psalms like the songs in our hymnbooks and hymnal supplements were created for many different contexts. Thank God for that because this past week while we were planning to delight in the dedication of our new space today all of us were also impacted in one way or another by the results of the election in the United States. As we grappled with this new historical reality, some of us may have found our way to the Psalms that express what we need to say to God and each other about the unexpected results of the election.

How is it that the Psalms can fulfill so many different purposes, and cover so many different human emotions and experiences of God;

from rage at the enemies of God

to praise for God's sovereignty

and a quiet and confidence hope in the God who is like a Shepherd who cares for the sheep?

Walter Brueggemann has given us a helpful framework to understand the different purposes of our Psalms.

Loosely he breaks them down into Psalms of orientation, disorientation and reorientation.

Psalms of orientation ground us in the simple delight of confident hope in the faithfulness of God. For example, when I used Psalm 23 yesterday, at Lina Braden's memorial, I drew on this simple yet also meaningful and important confidence. Doubt and fear are far away and the Psalmist is grateful for the goodness of the Lord. These Psalms sustain us all when we need them. They are songs of praise and thanksgiving for an orderly universe and the steadfast faithful love of God.

Psalms of disorientation on the other hand are those that reflect the fact that life never stays calm and serene. Life happens. Something happens that shakes our faith in God, in another person, in the church or in the world. Doubts arise. Fear and anger are strongly felt. It is not uncommon in times of disorientation to feel loss, hurt, alienation, suffering and disillusionment and the emotional pain that comes with all of this is deeply felt and real.

Let me name the elephant in the room for those of you who are regular attendees. My life transition has caused a kind of disorientation for this congregation. I am fully aware that asking any congregation even an affirming one to understand and if possible accept my life transition has been a lot to ask and even though many of you will accept that there was

no intent to hurt or harm any of you or this congregation that hurt and harm has been caused. We will continue to process that in our congregational meeting next Sunday and in many individual conversations along the way.

TUMC went through another time of disorientation in 2003 at the conclusion of a process to discuss human sexuality and whether or not to accept an LGBTQ person in pastoral leadership. It had been a good process. It included a Season of Caring and a Season of Education and a Season of Discernment where people listened deeply to one another but it ended with a vote that divided people from themselves and God and each other. What had previously been a time of deep respect and engagement of one another ended on that day when people ceased to engage each other respectfully and deep fears took over. There was no one on either side of that vote that did not feel that hurt or alienation in one way or another.

Shortly after that, in August of 2003, Gary Harder preached a sermon that included Brueggemann's Psalms framework of orientation, disorientation and reorientation. I have Gary's permission to reference that sermon today.

He spoke of both his own and the congregation's disorientation during that time. It was hard and many people here remember.

It was a time of deep brokenness and disorienting fears.

This week many of us were again faced with an experience of disorienting fears after we learned of the American election results.

Many have asked, how can this be? How can someone who espouses hate of everyone and everything that represents difference, so openly, how could he have appealed to so many? And if people who voted for Trump overlooked his misogyny and racism and many other horrible things he said and did in order to vote for him, what was it that he offered that gave them hope? I can't believe that there weren't kind and decent human beings who voted for him and so if they are kind and decent human beings what was their vote trying to communicate? An important question to ask.

I heard from some of you that you had deep sadness, disbelief, concern and fear about what this will mean for our world and even closer to home to your families who either are Americans or live there. And to all who find themselves on the margins for one reason or another, the margins that are now openly maligned by some, the Psalms of disorientation and lament are for you, for us. The psalms of lament are brash and unguarded expressions of grief and rage at what may sometimes seem like the absence of God. "How long O God, will you forget us forever?" is the cry of Psalm 13.

If there is something good about Psalms of disorientation it is that they are real.

They do not allow for any pretense that things are better than they seem. If we thought we were no longer racist, or sexist etcetera, now we know that we need to examine ourselves more deeply.

Is there a redemptive path out of this disorientation and if so what is it? What do I mean by redemption? I mean God's power to heal our human brokenness, save us, restore us to God's self and a setting things right where God is in charge.

The redemption of God comes in many forms. Some of it is pure grace and light from heaven and surprise and some of it will be something we can and need to participate in.

Already in response to the fears and hatred unleashed by the US election results, people are actively calling for actions that resist this hatred and fear.

There are already stories popping up here and there that point to a redemptive reorientation.

A young woman of colour at Baylor University is knocked off the sidewalk by a man who tells her that he does it, "so that America can be great again," and later in the week 300 students walk with her to school in protest.

The streets and the blogs and social media are full of lament and deep desire for and call for a renewed actions of love and kindness and solidarity with those who experience hate and discrimination. And they remind us that complacency at a time like this is complicity.

There is a groundswell of desire for all of us to actively live into the universe of justice and mercy for which God longs.

Was there a redemptive path for TUMC following the 2003 disorientation?

I think the redemption came slowly but steadily over the years as God remained present with this group of hurting and broken people. Some of it came through the work of the healing and reconciliation team, HART, a team of people within the congregation that reached out to every single person and in that process actively sought to promote healing. Our congregational guideline for how we conduct ourselves in meetings was one of the outcomes of the work of the healing and reconciliation team.

And the redemption of God continued to come in unexpected and surprising ways over many years often in small encounters between the people who were present at that time - as an unexpected offer of forgiveness, as a grace-filled love and acceptance of difference. Even hurting people continued to believe that if Love is Lord of Heaven how can we keep from singing.

And my return to work this week is my willingness to seek a path of redemptive reorientation. I am committed to seeking a redemptive path with God and with all of you with no preconceived notion of what it will or must look like. We'll work it out together.

The final category of Psalms that we have according to Brueggemann are those that express praise of God for this redemptive reorientation.

Psalm 98 is one of those and now I'm ready to talk about it.

These are the Psalms that because of some new experience of God's

redemption

people declare that God does in fact Reign with Justice and truth, compassion and mercy.

In Psalm 98,

God is praised for marvelous deeds and deliverance.

God's right hand and holy arm have set things right. In this psalm we hear echoes of Hannah's song as she anticipated the birth of Samuel and Mary's song as she anticipated the birth of Jesus. Both of them declared as does this Psalm that

God is doing a new thing

God is setting everything right (stanza 1)

and all nations will see what God is doing

and will praise God with song and dance and musical instruments

(stanza 2)

And then in stanza three all creation will join in the rejoicing and the praise.

Reorientation comes when there is a renewed confidence that God will judge the earth and the peoples of the earth with righteousness and equity.

This Psalm expresses what we call an eschatological hope, a hope that the end towards which we are all moving is one in which

Love and mercy, truth and justice will have the final say.

These Psalms are not the simple and uncomplicated confidence of the initial orientation but rather a "tried in fire" newness, and an assurance that God is in charge.



As I studied this Psalm this week I found out the hymn that we sing that most closely echoes this Psalm is Joy to the World.

Joy to the world! The Lord is come.

Let earth receive her King

Let every heart

Prepare Him room

And heaven and nature sing

Joy to the world, the Savior reigns

Let all their songs employ

While fields and floods

Rocks, hills and plains

Repeat the sounding joy

He rules the world with truth and grace,

And makes the nations prove

The glories of His righteousness,

And wonders of His love;

And wonders of His love;

And wonders, wonders of His love.

In our personal lives, in the life of our congregation in our participation in global affairs it is possible to be at many different stages.

I can't say for any of you where you might be at any one time or where you might be now.

The psalms are there for all of us and they are there for us wherever we find ourselves.

As regards the building project and our desire today to dedicate our labours and efforts to God and seek God's blessing, we are indeed ready to sing a new song.

We left our sense of orientation to move into the disorientation of a building project.

This affected all of us in various ways and our building partners and neighbours rather significantly.

For those who were present regularly in the building, they/we lived through the disorientation of moved offices, cold rooms, hot rooms, strong smells of paints and glues and fire retardants, loud noises, technology glitches, cramped quarters and dust and on and on.

For our neighbours the street was full of construction vehicles and noise and dirt,

but here we are settling in to our open, airy and light-filled new digs and a return to peace and quiet in the neighbourhood.

Reorientation is never a return to the old familiar but rather a finding ourselves in a new place and the song that we are granted to sing comes to us as a gift from God,  
a breath of fresh air,  
a sense of unexpected joy.

As we find we find ourselves where it is once again possible to  
participate  
in God's Reign,  
where we sense it as fresh and new and inviting,  
I pray that our new space will be part of a reorientation to God's  
purpose for us here at Queen and Lark,  
and that we will be able to Sing a New Song, A Redemption song.

