

How Can I Keep From Singing

by

The Reverend Rebecca Kirkpatrick
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

August 14, 2022

Hebrews 11:23-12:2

23 By faith Moses was hidden by his parents for three months after his birth, because they saw that the child was beautiful; and they were not afraid of the king's edict. ²⁴By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called a son of Pharaoh's daughter, ²⁵choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. ²⁶He considered abuse suffered for the Christ to be greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking ahead to the reward. ²⁷By faith he left Egypt, unafraid of the king's anger; for he persevered as though he saw him who is invisible. ²⁸By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel.

29 By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. ³⁰By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. ³¹By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.

32 And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— ³³who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions,

³⁴quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. ³⁵Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. ³⁶Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented— ³⁸of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

39 Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰since God had provided something better so that they would not, without us, be made perfect.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, ²looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

As many of you know, this past July, 44 of us participated in a trip to the Middle East as a part of this congregation's long-standing tradition of our incredibly gifted Sanctuary choir and friends traveling around the world to connect and perform with musicians in places like South Africa, Ireland, Russia, and Brazil.

Of course, one of the joys of this year's trip to the Middle East was not just being able to connect with musicians making beautiful music in a place that is too often colored by conflict and trauma, but to also be able to visit some of the significant religious and ancient sites that are inextricably bound to our Christian faith.

This October as a part of our World Communion Sunday celebrations you will have the opportunity to hear directly from Jeffrey Brillhart and participants in the trip who will share both about the remarkable musical experiences we had as well as our experience of the local history and culture, but this morning I wanted to share about one particular site that we visited on our last day in Israel and Palestine, before we traveled into Jordan.

While I had visited Israel and Palestine previously, I never had the opportunity to visit the Dead Sea and some of the archaeological sites in those southern regions. And I had never had the chance to visit Masada.

Masada is a plateau located on the eastern edge of the Judean desert 450 meters above the Dead Sea. Jewish historians claim that the first fortress was built there about 100 years before the birth of Christ - during the time of the Maccabees in Israel. Herod the Great who ruled during the time of Jesus' birth realized the strategic value of the Masada plateau and built for himself a refuge and winter palace. Remnants of that palace, his storerooms and cisterns have been recovered by archaeologists.

Later on, in the first Century as Jews unsuccessfully revolted against the Romans, and the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, Masada became the very last rebel stronghold in Judea. Living in Herod's old palace and adding their own places of worship and community life, the rebels held out for months in the year 74 against a legion of Roman soldiers who made their own camps surrounding the plateau, trapping and isolating them inside.

According to the Jewish historian Josephus, as hope faded, the leader of the rebels - Eleazar Ben Yair convinced the leaders of the 960-member community that it would be better for them to take their own lives than live in shame and humiliation as Roman slaves. When the Romans finally breached the walls, they found no one alive.

You won't be surprised to hear that it was pretty hot the morning that we traveled in a cable car up the mountain to tour the site and listened as our guide told us all of the traditions surrounding Masada. We huddled together under what little shade was available to listen as one of our group read the speech that Eleazar is supposed to have given to inspire their sacrifice.

“Since we long ago resolved never to be servants to the Romans, nor to any other than to God Himself, Who alone is the true and just Lord of mankind, the time is now come that obliges us to make that resolution true in practice...We were the very first that revolted, and we are the last to fight against them; and I cannot but esteem it as a favor that God has granted us, that it is still in our power to die bravely, and in a state of freedom.”

Our guide shared as well that it had long been the tradition to bring modern Israeli soldiers to Masada as the culmination of their training, to instill within them a national pride in the bravery and sacrifice of the rebels held up at Masada.

Sadly, in recent days, as has been experienced all over the world, especially among our young people, there has been a rise in Israeli soldiers dying by suicide. So, the decision was made instead of bringing soldiers to Masada where they were told a story of what to do when hope has finally failed, that instead they are taken on guided tours of the national holocaust museum in Jerusalem - Yad Vashem - which translated from the Hebrew means - a memorial and a name.

The intention is that they might hear the names of those who suffered and died at the hands of the Nazis, but that they would also hear a story that ends in life, a story where hope doesn't completely fail. To be told of a moment in their history that was darker than anyone could have imagined...as dark as those last days experienced at Masada... but where hope was **not** defeated.

Our lesson from the book of Hebrews this morning - a continuation of the passage that we heard last Sunday - is in a sense attempting to achieve the same kind of purpose - to help this Jewish Christian community remember the names and the struggles of their ancestors and point them to the promise of hope and life beyond their present suffering and sacrifice as some of the earliest Christians.

We don't know exactly when Hebrews was written, but it was likely written within the same generation of those Jews who died at Masada - in the late first Century. Even

though we refer to this book as a letter, scholars actually classify it more accurately as a sermon, bearing the hallmarks of some of the most sophisticated styles of ancient oration.

In this section the preacher pivots from recounting of the acts of faith by the patriarchs that often resulted in their accomplishments and deliverance to those who through their acts of faith faced tragic consequences. Beginning with Moses who just like Jesus Christ chose a harder path so that he might save his people, the preacher goes on to list some of the greatest military leaders of Israel, as well as some of its greatest martyrs.

The first hearers of this sermon would recognize that not all of these faithful were successful. From the persecution of the prophets to the torture of the Maccabean martyrs, this becomes a litany of strife.

But strife is not the last word, and this is not the end of the sermon.

Preacher Tom Long, in his reflections on Hebrews, poignantly describes what it means to have faith in the shadow of despair. as we experience our own litany of struggle.

“Under the pressure of testing and suffering, the naked eye can see only the oppressor. we can see only the jackboot of tyranny, or the scars of child abuse, or the x-rays with the spot on the lung. Faith sees all that; it does not pretend there is no Pharaoh, no evil, no disease. But faith also sees God, the God who promises to bring an end to all that harms and destroys.”¹

The litany ends in a promise. That if we look to Christ as our example, the one who has already suffered in the past, we might be able to lay aside some of our grief, our strife, our sin, the parts of being human that slow us down, and weigh us down, so that we can reclaim the joy of Christ.

What is interesting is that in most of the book of Hebrews the people are called to look Jesus Christ as the Great High Priest who will show them the way as an inspiration for faith. But in this section on suffering and persecution, the people are also instructed to look to and to be guided by the great cloud of witnesses who have come before. A litany of names, so that when suffering inevitably comes for us all, we will be able to remember them and remember hope.

¹Long, Tom. Hebrews. John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1997.

In his poem, *Our Children Coming of Age*, Wendell Berry uses the metaphor of music (as he does in many of his pieces about the passing of knowledge and tradition from one generation to the next) to describe how the echoes of those who have come before us in that great cloud of witnesses pass on to us a song that will lift us up in moments of need.

“In the great circle, dancing in and out of time
you move now toward your partners
answering the music suddenly audible to you
that only carried you before and will carry you again.”

Music has this power to remind us to have hope, to give us a language of hope in the face of hard things. There are countless hymns that have been written to do just that. We are actually going to sing two of them yet this morning.

My Life Flows On, which is also popularly known by its tune name and refrain - *How Can I Keep from Singing* was first published in 1869 by American Baptist pastor Robert Lowry, who is also known for writing - *Shall We Gather At the River*. The hymn is often erroneously cited as a Quaker Hymn, so often that Quakers themselves decided that they liked it so much they adopted it as their own in the 20th Century.

*My life flows on in endless song; Above earth's lamentation,
I hear the sweet, tho' far-off hymn That hails a new creation;
Through all the tumult and the strife I hear the music ringing;
It finds an echo in my soul— How can I keep from singing?*

The piece rose in popularity in the 1960's when American folk singer Pete Seeger recorded it adding an additional verse written by his friend Quaker poet and children's author Doris Penn which was intended to reference the persecution of those investigated by the House Un-American Activities Committee - which Seeger himself was called to testify before.

*When tyrants tremble, sick with fear,
And hear their death-knell ringing,
When friends rejoice both far and near,
How can I keep from singing?
In prison cell and dungeon vile,
Our thoughts to them go winging,*

*When friends by shame are undefiled,
How can I keep from singing?*

Even though our hymnal doesn't include this modern verse, it is still very much a song that articulates the ways that faith and hope can still not just dwell within us but emerge outside of us into the world even in the darkest moments of our lives.

Martin Rinkart was a Lutheran pastor who came to Eilenburg, Saxony, at the beginning of the Thirty Years' War. The walled city of Eilenburg became the refuge for political and military fugitives, and soon the city was beset with overcrowding, pestilence, and famine. Armies overran it three times. During the height of a severe plague in 1637, Rinkart was the only surviving pastor in Eilenburg, conducting as many as 50 funerals in a day. He performed more than 4000 funerals in that year, including that of his wife.

It was in the midst of this overwhelming struggle and grief that he wrote one of our most beloved hymns of hope and thanksgiving.

*Now thank we all our God, with heart and hands and voices,
Who wondrous things has done, in Whom this world rejoices;
Who from our mothers' arms has blessed us on our way
With countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.
To keep us in his grace, and guide us when perplexed,
and free us from all ills, of this world and the next.*

Strife is not the last word in the preacher's sermon to the Hebrews, and as human beings who hope, we continually find a way to use our voices to help remind us of that hope and to embody that hope in the music that we sing.

Just as I shared with you about just one of the places that we visited on the choir trip, I want to share with you about just one of the songs that our choir sang. This fall of course we will share our experiences and reflections on our time in Israel and Palestine, and our own moments of recognizing hope in one of the most strife ridden places in the world. Every single piece that was sung by our choir and the choirs with which we performed, had an element of singing hope into the world, but there is just one that I haven't been able to get out of my head in the weeks since we have been home.

Dolly Parton recorded the song, Light of a Clear Blue Morning in 1977 at the end of a painful three-year season as she moved through one of the darkest moments of her

professional and personal life as her friend and former musical partner sued her for a million dollars (more than she was worth at the time) and slammed her in the press. It was when she finally felt the end of that struggle on the horizon that she wrote a song about having hope in a life beyond the darkness.

*It's been a long dark night And I've been a waitin' for the morning
It's been a long hard fight But I see a brand new day a dawning
I've been looking for the sunshine You know I ain't seen it in so long
But everything's gonna work out just fine
And everything's gonna be all right That's been all wrong*

*'Cause I can see the light of a clear blue morning
I can see the light of a brand new day
And everything's gonna be all right
It's gonna be okay*

Now if it is a little hard for you to wrap your head around our choir singing a Dolly Parton song, the arrangement of the piece for a cappella choir by Craig Hella Johnson that they performed is incredibly beautiful.

It began with two of our young adults on the trip - first Hanna Silverberg on solo flute who was then joined by tenor Oscar Medina Saldana singing these words of both struggle and hope with the choir supporting him underneath. But halfway through the piece it is almost as though the song resets. The men come in low repeating the words - clear blue morning, then joined by the altos, repeating simply the word morning, and then three of our sopranos from the rear of the venue repeating the refrain of light in the most bright and hopeful arpeggio of notes you could imagine.

I heard them perform this piece several times on the trip and each time it felt exactly like being surround by a great cloud of witnesses that having passed through the struggle themselves already, gave witness to the endurance of hope and light on the other side.

Each of us, every community, every society passes through seasons of darkness. May we never stop hearing a refrain of hope in our hearts and the voices of one another, that we might add our own refrain to the great cloud of witnesses who have passed this way before. Amen.