If I close my eyes when we sing the Doxology, I am transported back to the dark wooden sanctuary of my family’s church in Carmi, Illinois. I’m suddenly standing next to my cousins, the light of marbled stained glass windows shining in streaks across the red velveteen pew pillows. And my grandmother’s voice is a clear above the rest of the choir’s, a soprano so sonorous and sure. It is a clarion call every time I hear Old Hundredth in a sacred space, a call back to my deepest joy, to my first holy place, to my family, to what faith looks like when stretched across generations living and long ago.

That’s what music can do - pull us from where we are to where we once were, whether we remember it or not. That’s what Isaiah 12 is doing, too, acting as a hinge between Isaiah’s narrative of Judah’s history - including all the difficult therein - and Isaiah’s oracles of judgment against the nations. But Isaiah 12 is interesting because it wasn’t originally there, a stopping point for the people to take a beat, a breath.

See, it is thought that the book of Isaiah is written by more than one prophet - conveniently named “First Isaiah” and “Second Isaiah” and “Third Isaiah” and written across the late eighth to the fifth century BCE. My Old Testament professor, Michael D. Coogan, writes that “the book of Isaiah is the result of a lengthy process of formation, which began with the collection of oracles of Isaiah of Jerusalem. To this nucleus later writings were attached, and many additions were made to its early parts.” Our chapter today, chapter 12, is technically grouped under First Isaiah but it is written in the style, genre, vocabulary and theology of Second Isaiah. This Isaiah - the Second one - served in Babylon during the time of Israel’s exile there. Recognizing that exile can bring doubt, unbelief, mistrust, duress, fidgety and therefore, dangerous behavior, Second Isaiah writes to replenish their drought with living water - with water they know and have tasted before.

---

Rolf Jacobson asks us to consider: Is it easier to say to a person who is struggling with their faith, “You just have to believe”? Or is it easier to say, “Let’s pray”? Is it more effective to admonish someone, “Trust in God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your strength!”? Or is it more effective to say, “Let’s sing this hymn together: ‘Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see’”?²

On a week when we celebrate the history of our country, we are reminded of songs that have stretched across our short existence as a nation. Songs that have stories woven within the verses, songs sung in fields and at the shore, at parades and on military bases. Songs that purposefully stir our memories and our hope, keeping us rooted and teaching us to reach for what is possible and not yet.

If our national songs stir us, how much more do our spiritual songs? Songs that have been sung not only in these United States but across the world and for years longer than we’ve been around. Songs that have united the faithful across generations that we could stand on the hinge between memory and hope and know we are not alone? Songs that bring us back and send us out.

I’ve invited Glenn to the piano to lead us in a few of those songs as part of our sermon - just a few bars here and there. You are welcome to sing along but you are also welcome to sit and let it wash over you, recalling the places you heard these songs first and inviting you to stand on that hinge of what you remember and what you stand in hope for - what the Spirit is leading you to do with such long-lasting, generational faith.

[It is Well with my Soul]
[Great is Thy Faithfulness]
[Amazing Grace]

The neurologist Oliver Sacks told a story about a woman named Mrs. O’C and a joy most unexpected. Mrs. O’C was an older woman in her 80s who lived in a nursing home in the Bronx. “Late one night, she has a dream and in her dream, she hears a female voice singing. It sounds like an Irish ballad. She told Dr. Sacks…” about the first song which was followed by a second song and a third one...all Irish-sounding. “Then she wakes up. But even awake, her head is still filled with sounds - those same songs keep going...and going...They are very loud, so loud that she’s puzzled.”

“At first, this woman thought, well, these voices have got to be coming from a radio somewhere...So she wandered around [and] looked for a radio. But there wasn’t a radio on. Everyone else was asleep.”

She thought she was hearing things. She grew afraid. So Mrs. O’C saw her doctor who referred to a neurologist - Oliver Sacks. And when “they first met, Dr. Sacks had to yell over the noise inside Mrs. O.C.’s head. She could barely hear him. She was now thoroughly rattled, and the music continued deafening her.”

“So Dr. Sacks asked her, could you hum these songs? Could you describe them? And she said, yup. They’re Irish. They’re sung by a female and somehow they’re vaguely familiar.

Dr. Sacks asked Mrs. O’C “about her childhood and discovered that she was from Ireland, that her father had died before she was born, and her mother had died when she was only 5 years old. She was sent to America to live with a rather forbidding maiden aunt. She had no conscious memory of the first five years of her life; no memory of her mother, of Ireland, of home.”

She was in exile from her people, from her past, from her parents.

So Dr. Sacks wonders - could this be a small stroke that has somehow, unorthodoxly, opened up a door in her memory? Could these songs be the voice of her mother, singing to her through the years a song of living water that wilt not let her go? A song that says: I will be with you. You are not alone. You are mine and you are loved.
Mrs. O'C responded to Dr. Sack’s theory - “I'm an old woman with a stroke in an old people's home. But I feel I'm a child in Ireland again. I feel my mother's arms. I see her. I hear her voice singing.”

No longer a stranger or a guest but like a child at home. What a song of joy, this song of ours. Thanks be to God. Amen.

---

3 All quotes in this section are from: https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=17261330