

Heart songs of Lent

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I'm a bit of a congregational song nerd, and the church music folks I know talk about things like "sound pools" and "heart songs."

Sound pools are what Mennonite musician, teacher, and hymnologist Mary Oyer and her students (who became my teachers) describe as the body of music that a culture or community shares. The melodies, rhythms, and accompaniments feel right and familiar because they connect with the vibrations of our bodies.

Within a sound pool, we can find heart songs--the texts, tunes, and occasions when these songs have been sung that leave indelible marks on us. For example, a congregation might hold a special place in its communal heart for Brian Wren's hymn "This is a Day of New Beginnings" because they sang it during a service of reconciliation when a church split had been looming.

Sound pools and heart songs aren't always communal; they can be personal too. Weezer's song "Heart Songs" is about this phenomenon:

These are my heart songs.
They never feel wrong.
And when I wake for goodness sake,
These are the songs I keep singing.

I can totally relate. After you've heard U2 play "With or Without You" in a room full of thousands of people (three times!) or harmonized in your seat while Tracy Chapman played "Fast Car," those songs stay with you every bit as much as "O Come, O Come Immanuel" or "Jesus Loves Me."

Yet Lent and Easter--unlike Christmas--don't really have a body of tunes that find us in supermarkets or doctors' offices. When I've heard "Silver Bells" or "Winter Wonderland" one too many times, I put my Advent playlist on repeat; it calms me down and ejects the saccharin-infused ear worms from my brain. At this time of the year, though, I'm left wondering: What songs in my sound pool get me in the Lenten mood?

I never really thought about this until I read Psalm 27 and realized just how many ear worms this "Triumphant Song of Confidence" (the title my Bible gives the psalm) activates for me.

I can't get past the first verse without starting to hum James Cleveland's setting. The simplicity of the lyrics and the repetition of the question "Whom shall I fear?"--along with Cleveland's rockin' melody--make this one a definite ear worm for me.

Then there's the Fanny Crosby classic based on Exodus 33:22, which alludes to verse 5 of Psalm 27:

A wonderful Savior is Jesus my Lord,
A wonderful Savior to me;
He hideth my soul in the cleft of the rock,
Where rivers of pleasure I see.

I get less excited about this ear worm, but I've got to give Crosby props for such painting such epic murals with her lyrics.

Verse 9 of this Davidic psalm remind me of another one, the 51st, the penitential psalm used on Ash Wednesday: "Do not hide your face from me.... Do not cast me off, do not forsake me, O God of my salvation!" These resonances lead to ear worm three: the praise-and-worship standard "Create in Me a Clean Heart."

Then the last two verses of Psalm 27 trigger two more ear worms for me, this time from the Taizé community: "I Am Sure I Shall See" and "Wait For the Lord."

While ear worms and heart songs aren't quite the same thing, both speak to the way songs stay with us in ways that text alone doesn't. Scientists study this kind of stuff, and there are any number of theories about how and why songs do this. I know from my own experience that meditative singing in the style the Taizé community practices it does open up some other part of my soul.

What David does is to give us the song of his heart and soul, in order to give us a sense of the peaks and valleys of the spiritual life. His experience millennia ago connects with musicians of our own time. Together, they give us a new way to consider the heart songs of Lent, the songs we keep singing even when we don't quite know why.