

How can they still worship? (Easter 5A, Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16; 1 Peter 2:2-10)

I think the women at the prison where I preach know what the psalmist knew.

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In my role as pastor, I get to preach in many different places. One place I enjoy preaching is at the Women's Therapeutic Residential Center.

The WTRC is a women's prison in Tennessee, and my wife Lisa and I serve there as volunteers. Lisa, a licensed conflict mediator, conducts weekly sessions with the women, helping them resolve conflicts and giving them the necessary tools to resolve conflicts themselves. I come in from time to time to serve as preacher for worship services.

The worship services are led by the women: they select the music, the prayers, and the order. For me, it is one of the most rewarding experiences. To see the joy on the faces of the residents and staff, to hear the testimonies and singing, and to see the dancing and spoken-word artistry from the women always moves me in such a powerful way.

As I look at those praying, praising, and singing women, sometimes I can't help but ask, My God, how can they still worship like this? How can they still worship in a place like this? How can they still worship with all the issues and problems that they are facing, both inside and out? How can they still worship when their children are missing them, when their families don't seem to care? How can they still worship when the parole didn't come through? How can they still worship when everybody

seems to have given up on them?

I imagine they can still sing, worship, pray, praise, and dance because they know what the psalmist knew—because their prayer life is in tune with it. Maybe they seek refuge in God because they know that God is their strong fortress—the one who can take them out of the net that others have hidden for them. Maybe they have already committed their spirits to God because they know that God has already redeemed. Maybe they know that their times are in God’s hand, and they trust that God will deliver them from their enemies. Maybe they know that God’s face does indeed shine on them and that they are saved by God’s steadfast love.

Maybe they understand what Peter was trying to get his hearers to understand: you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Maybe, despite where they are and what others think about them, they understand—some maybe for the first time—that God still cares. God still loves them. God hears their prayers, and God has shown grace and mercy.

I, for one, am glad to witness all of this in worship.