

February 19, 2017  
Seventh Sunday after Epiphany

# Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Wait for It”

The Reverend Amy Starr Redwine



*To meditate on the psalms is to choose to will to be ourselves before God,  
to sing full throated songs of praise when that is appropriate and  
to give honest articulation to our despair when we are sad.*

~Soren Kierkegaard

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## **Psalm 27**

<sup>1</sup>The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?

<sup>2</sup>When evildoers assail me to devour my flesh — my adversaries and foes — they shall stumble and fall.

<sup>3</sup>Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident.

<sup>4</sup>One thing I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: to live in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD, and to inquire in his temple.

<sup>5</sup>For he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble; he will conceal me under the cover of his tent; he will set me high on a rock.

<sup>6</sup>Now my head is lifted up above my enemies all around me, and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing and make melody to the LORD.

<sup>7</sup>Hear, O LORD, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me!

<sup>8</sup>“Come,” my heart says, “seek his face!” Your face, LORD, do I seek.

<sup>9</sup>Do not hide your face from me. Do not turn your servant away in anger, you who have been my help. Do not cast me off, do not forsake me, O God of my salvation!

<sup>10</sup>If my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will take me up.

<sup>11</sup>Teach me your way, O LORD, and lead me on a level path because of my enemies.

<sup>12</sup>Do not give me up to the will of my adversaries, for false witnesses have risen against me, and they are breathing out violence.

<sup>13</sup>I believe that I shall see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living.

<sup>14</sup>Wait for the LORD; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the LORD!

## **Mark 28:16–20**

<sup>16</sup>Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. <sup>17</sup>When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. <sup>18</sup>Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

<sup>19</sup>Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>20</sup>and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

*“Wait for It”*  
*Psalm 27, Mark 28:16–20*

The first time Maya Shankar held a violin, she was utterly captivated. The feel of the instrument, the bow, the sound it made, she loved everything about it. She took lessons and got really, *really* good, so good that when she and her mother happened to pass by the Julliard School of Music one day they went inside and talked a violin teacher into hearing Maya play. This led to Maya being accepted into the school’s summer program and then taking classes there. Eventually, she became a student of the famous violinist Itzhak Perlman. At the age of fifteen, Maya was well on her way to fulfilling her passionate desire to becoming a professional violinist.

But then one day, while practicing, Maya stretched her finger to reach a note she’d played many times, and she felt something pop in her right hand. She had overstretched a tendon. Doctors told her it would heal, but that she could not use that hand for a while. So for an entire year, Itzhak Perlman taught her lessons focused entirely on her bowing – she played only open strings. Then, at the end of that year, when she started using her right hand again, something still wasn’t right. Doctors told her she would never regain the full use of her hand and that she should stop playing to prevent further injury. Maya’s dream of a life as a concert violinist was over. She was **devastated**.<sup>1</sup>

Walter Brueggemann suggests that each psalm can be put into one of three categories: *orientation* – psalms that are confident of who God is and who we are; *disorientation* – psalms of lament and despair from those who have lost any sense of identity, both their own and God’s; and *reorientation*. The psalms of reorientation, including Psalm 27 which Lucy read earlier, are psalms which propose a new way of understanding God, ourselves, and our world.

In order to understand the psalms of reorientation, we must first accept that **there can be no reorientation without disorientation** – the kind of disorientation Maya Shankar experienced when her dreams of becoming a violinist, not to mention all of the hard work and sacrifices that got her so close to achieving that dream – were inexplicably ended by what should have been a

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<sup>1</sup> *Hidden Brain*, NPR Podcast, Episode 15: Loss and Renewal, <http://www.npr.org/podcasts/510308/hidden-brain>

minor injury. Brueggemann argues that this is the pattern of every life of faith. Our constant movement that among these three states is part of what makes the psalms so meaningful to us – because we recognize ourselves and our experiences in these ancient prayers.

Richard Rohr makes a similar argument, The terms Rohr uses for these three experiences of faith are *order, disorder, and reorder*. “Order” necessarily comes first; it is what we need, especially when we are spiritually and emotionally immature, to help us make sense of life. As Rohr puts it, order “doesn’t really know the full picture, but it thinks it does.”

*Disorder* is the real and excruciatingly uncomfortable process of recognizing that **we don’t know nearly as much as we thought we did**. In a state of disorder, it becomes clear that not only is there a lot we don’t know or understand, but most of the time **we don’t even know what it is we don’t know**. When we confront this reality, there is no escaping the discomfort that goes along with it. This kind of disorder and pain is something with which the author of Psalm 27 is familiar. “...evildoers assail me, to devour my flesh, my adversaries and foes...[and] false witnesses have risen against me, and they are breathing out violence.”

But Psalm 27 also illustrates what happens when we move through that season of disorientation or disorder – and come to a whole new kind of reality. This is not a return to where we started – it is much more. The place of re-orientation or re-order is a place where **we can see more clearly** all that is; it is a place where, as Rohr puts it, “darkness and light coexist, [where] paradox is okay...Here death is a part of life, failure is a part of victory, and imperfection is included in perfection. Opposites collide and unite; *everything* belongs.”<sup>2</sup>

Our nation is in a time of disorientation, where we are struggling to understand how we could ever reconcile our diverse views and find a sense of unity. Political differences seem uniquely entrenched and divisive. Sins we thought we’d at least started to overcome – racism, anti-Semitism, sexism, classism are as **prevalent** and **toxic** as ever. People across the country awake each day with a sense of uncertainty about the future. We aren’t sure who we can trust, and the once-stable institutions that provided a sense of order and identity are struggling for relevance.

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Rohr evotional, December 6, 2016.

But the cycle of faith, and the cycle of history is clear: order, disorder, reorder. The fact that we are in a time of disorder, means that re-order is not far behind. Last week near the end of the service, the children presented a reading from Rabbi Sandy Sasso's children's book *In God's Name*. At the beginning of the book, each person has his or her own name for God, and that name is based on what that person knows and understands about the world. So the farmer calls God "Source of Life," and the soldier calls God "Maker of Peace," and the doctor calls God "Healer," and the young parents call God "Mother" or "Father," and the lonely child calls God "Friend." This state correlates to a place of orientation or order. I know what I know, and I understand and interpret the world and God based on my experiences.

But, as in real life, what happens in the story is that the place of orientation and order just isn't sustainable, because we are communal creatures and we can only live within the bubble of our own experiences and our own understanding for so long. And as these different people interact and share their understanding of who God is and how God is named, they discover that they have no common understanding of God, and no capacity for recognizing that God might be bigger than one person's name. So, as the story goes, "each person said, 'My name for God is best,' and none of them listened to each other." This part of the story correlates to a place of disorientation or disorder. As you can imagine, finding out for the first time that other people choose to call God something other than what you call God is apt to cause all of us a certain amount of discomfort, which is likely to lead to conflict.

Fortunately, the story doesn't end there. One day, all of these people who call God by different names come together in the one place. In this place there is a lake. They gather around the lake and as they look into the water, it is like looking in a mirror, God's mirror. In that reflection, each person sees their own face and they also see the faces of all the other people, together in the water's reflection. And the story concludes: "At that moment, the people knew that **all their names for God were good**. All at once, all together, *they called God One*."<sup>3</sup> Order, disorder, re-order.

In Psalm 27, we encounter a person of faith who remembers the pain and discomfort of disorientation but can still hold on to the promise of God's love and presence. "The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear? The

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<sup>3</sup> Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, *In God's Name*. Jewish Lights: 2004.

Lord is the stronghold of my life, of whom shall I be afraid?...Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war rise up against me, yet I shall be confident..." The psalmist has moved beyond simplistic categorizations of experiences as good or bad, sacred or secular. She now sees that everything – the best and worst of what life offers – belongs to God. And so she writes, "One thing I asked of the Lord: to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life...for he will hide me in his shelter in the day of trouble...he will set me high on a rock. Now my head is lifted up above my enemies all around me." This is someone whose perspective has completely shifted, who can hold together the paradox that God is all things to all people *and* God is one, that God loves us *and* is present with us even in our suffering, that God uses and transforms every experience we have, that God is constantly at work within and among us – even when it feels like things are tearing apart at the seams.

After she learned that she would never be able to play the violin again, Maya Shankar was understandably depressed. It felt unbearable to her that this door had been closed because this was the door to the house she had always imagined herself living in. But one day during this time she discovered a book about the human brain. She was fascinated by it and eventually ended up pursuing a career in cognitive science...a career so successful that she led a team at the White House which applied the lessons of cognitive science to improving the effectiveness of government programs. Looking back, Maya sees that her time playing the violin laid the groundwork for her career. Although she didn't end up being a musician, she discovered another possibility – a door to a new house, as it were – where she could apply the discipline, intelligence, and passion that had served her so well as a violinist.

Re-orientation is a place of openness and acceptance. It does not deny suffering or pain but sees it for what it is – a necessary part of the human experience that often can teach us things we cannot learn any other way. **It is this learning that makes the place of re-orientation fundamentally different from the place of orientation where we all must begin.** Re-orientation enables us to look at our former reality with a whole new perspective, like seeing in color where before you could see only black and white. Once you have gone from seeing in black and white to seeing in color, well, you can't un-see that. Likewise, the knowledge that leads us to a true place of re-orientation cannot be unlearned or forgotten.

In the gospels, Jesus had a knack for intentionally disorienting and disturbing his followers. He did it, as we noted a couple of weeks ago, with his first sermon. Blessed are the poor, and the meek, and the persecuted. But he was only getting started there. Over and over, he says things that do not fit our understanding. Follow me, and I will make you fish for people. Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you. To those who have, more will be given; and from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. Sell what you have, give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

These sayings of Jesus, and many more, confuse, confound, disrupt, and disturb. Why is this? Why would the Son of God, love incarnate, our comforter, healer, protector, savior, want to nudge – or sometimes shove – us into a place of disorientation? Perhaps it is because the world God longs for us to inhabit is profoundly different, and infinitely bigger, than the world we imagine for ourselves. It is a world, like the one the psalmist paints, where God personally attends to us and our needs, protecting us from our enemies, but where God calls us to love our enemies as well, because they too belong to God. Jesus confuses and confounds, disrupts and disturbs because without going through disorientation, **we do not *learn*, we do not *change*, we do not *grow*.**

If we read the psalms, if we take seriously the words of Jesus, then we learn that disorientation *is a good thing*. Because orientation and disorientation are never the destination, they are necessary stops along the journey toward re-orientation, toward ***transformation***. The real destination of that journey is not a place, but a **state of mind**. A **state of mind** like the psalmist has, the capacity to see clearly and to act boldly to align our lives and our world with what God desires for **all of us**, which is *always, always*, love, justice, and peace. Reorientation is the place where we can say with confidence and deep trust: Wait for the Lord! Be strong, and let your heart take courage. Wait for the Lord!