

“Know it by Heart”

Based on Deuteronomy 26:1-11 and Romans 10:8b-13

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“I know it by heart.” That’s what you want a musician to say about their music that they are preparing for performance. Before they go public with their music, they need to know it by heart. To learn a piece of music, you start with the score sheet, the notes and words. As you rehearse, you become more and more familiar with the song. At some point you no longer have to look at the score sheet because you have sung the song so much you are starting to get it memorized. You keep on practicing until you get to the place where you don’t need the score sheet any more. That’s when the fun really begins. You know the song so well now that you can start playing with it, becoming more expressive, coloring outside the lines if you will. When you know the song by heart, that’s when you can perform that song with conviction, with your whole being.

To know something by heart, whether it be a song, a poem, or a story, is to have it so internalized that it becomes a part of who you are. When you sing a song that you know by heart, recite a poem that you know by heart, retell a story that you know by heart, you express something of yourself. You come across as authentic and sincere. You reveal a part of yourself when you perform something that you know by heart.

The Israelites knew the story by heart of how God had delivered them from slavery in Egypt and brought them to the promised land, a land flowing with milk and honey. It was the land that they currently occupied. And every year, at the time of the first grain harvest, each family would take the first fruits of their harvest to the Temple, offering their gift to God, and saying by heart, “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor...” They would retell the story of God’s deliverance of their people from bondage. It was a story told countless of times, a story that was known by heart, a story that shaped who they were as a people. Israel is a people with a story, a story that is known and told by heart.

What about you and I? Not being part of the Israelite people we don't have the same story. Our people were not once slaves in Egypt. God has not led us through the wilderness and given us a land flowing with milk and honey. Our stories are different. But do you have a story of how God delivered you or your family? What is your salvation story?

Each of our salvation stories is different. And maybe when it comes to telling the story of God's deliverance the story is open-ended. The final chapter has not yet been written. God doesn't just deliver us once. God delivers us over and over through our whole lives. What can you tell of your deliverance story so far? I know part of my deliverance story by heart. It was October of 1983. I was at a church camp. The pastor gave a devotion that stressed the point that when Jesus died on the cross, that he died for my sins because God loved me that much. For the first time a light clicked on and I realized that Jesus died for me, that God loves me, and that God has a purpose for my life. The Spirit moved in my heart. For an awkward kid who didn't feel like he fit in, this revelation of God's love and a divine purpose was life changing. It was at that devotional at church camp where for the first time I felt forgiven and loved by God. I was a different person. In a way I was born again that night. That's part of my salvation story. I'm sure yours is different. And if you don't yet have a salvation story, be patient. One day your story will come to you. Salvation stories aren't something you sit down and write or just dream up. These stories find you and claim you.

Paul tells us that any person who knows in their heart that Jesus is Lord and confesses with their mouth that God raised Jesus from the dead will be saved. This is not just mental assent. It is not just parroting words or repeating back the words given to you like some kind of salvation script. It is not a magic formula. Paul said this salvation is effective for those who know in their heart. It is a deep knowing, a knowing that you can't be argued out of or will simply forget. You don't have to study up on it to refresh your memory. You know it by heart. Paul is saying to us, "If you know that you know that you know that Jesus is Lord and that God raised him from the dead then you will be saved." That's a promise of deliverance that Paul is implying. If you know Jesus by heart you will be saved, delivered, healed. If you know Jesus by heart you will make it

through the time of testing and struggle. God will see to it that you will make it through the storm. Our deliverance story can be boiled down to this simple saying: I believe with all my heart that Jesus is Lord and God raised him from the dead. Holding on to this belief is enough for God to deliver us from whatever we may be going through today. With this faith in God there is deliverance from what seeks to sap the spirit of life right out of us.

It is good to know these things by heart as we wander into the wilderness of Lent, to know by heart that God is our deliverer from oppression, pain and heart ache. This is a season when we are encouraged to pay attention to our spiritual life, to do some self-examination, to reflect on our relationship with God. When we do this work, of looking into our hearts and our souls, what we find may be messy. We live complicated lives. Inside our hearts is a mixture of emotions, of hurts, doubts, resentments and frustrations. We try to avoid this kind of self-reflection because it can be painful and confusing to look inside ourselves. We may not like what we see. We may find our spirits to be worn out and parched. The state of our souls may not be a rich paradise and more like a barren wilderness. And when we confront our messiness and hurts, our wounds and the cold and dry places of our soul, it is good to hold some things in our heart...our salvation story, our trust in Jesus, our hope in God to deliver.

We enter into the season of Lent wounded and in need of healing. Of course, the acuteness of our hurt is different. Some of us are just dealing with the minor irritants of life, but for the most part life is pretty good. Others of us are carrying some deep hurts and are struggling. And I suspect that if each of us really dug down deep, we could unearth some pain and hurt that we buried a long time ago. We may be more wounded than we realize. We are all carrying some pain. Life has a way of wearing us down. Disagreements and misunderstandings, loss, failures, illness, unintended consequences, there is so much we experience in life that cuts at our heart and can beat us up. We can't escape it. Even if we know by heart that Jesus loves us and has the lordship of our hearts, we still get hurt. We are all wounded. We are all in need of healing.

Healing is a journey. We can't just take a pill or have a good night's sleep and be all better. Healing is a process. In fact, the healing process stretches out for our entire life. Deep healing of those things that have hurt our heart takes time. It takes a lot of prayer and reflection. It takes talking things out with a trusted friend, or maybe a therapist. It takes putting good medicine in your heart: beauty, love, laughter, good friends, good music, good food, serenity, peace. To heal we sometimes have to unplug and just breathe.

This is what Lent can be for us, an intentional time to do what we need to do to experience healing. I know often Lent is portrayed as a heavy time, a drudgery, where we have to give up stuff and be serious. But Lent doesn't have to be a burdensome duty. Lent can be a season where we intentionally create space in our lives where we can heal. Fasting is a traditional discipline during Lent. Another word for fasting is unplugging. We can unplug from the negative stuff that is constantly coming at us through social media or cable news. We can prioritize spending time in nature, especially now that the cold and dormancy of winter is finally giving way to the warmth and vibrancy of spring. Now is the time where we can make time to talk things out with a friend, to go get a cup of coffee and have a heart to heart conversation, to share the burdens we are carrying and to know that we don't carry our burdens alone. Let Lent be a season where you take the time to go visit an art gallery or attend a concert, to maybe go to the Franklin Park Conservatory, or take a walk in one of our many metro parks. Find ways to place yourself in the midst of beauty.

Our healing journey extends beyond the season of Lent, but we can make it to the end of our healing journey because of what we know by heart. We know in our hearts that God loves us. We know in our hearts that Jesus died so that we might live. We know in our hearts that God has seen us through trials before and will do so again. So let us enter into this season of Lent with hopeful expectation that God will walk with us through it all and bring us out of it into the joy of the resurrection, the life-giving season of Easter.