

Isaiah 12:2-6

By Teri McDowell Ott

Many of us distrust our physical selves, focusing too much on our minds, too much on our ability to think and rationalize to solve all our problems. We walk around like stressed-out heads on sticks, neglecting the mind-body connection. Somatic therapy seeks to heal the split between body and mind (often caused by trauma) and uses breath work and body movement to help people settle their nervous systems. In his book, "[My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending our Hearts and Bodies](#)", Resmaa Menakem describes somatic work as not about reducing stress, but increasing our body's ability to manage stress. Breathing exercises and meditation won't make your commute shorter, your co-workers less difficult, your bills easier to pay. But it will help you be less resentful or reactive when your commute, your co-workers, your bills make life more difficult.

Menakem's grandmother inspired his study and use of somatic therapy. "My grandmother was a strong and loving woman. But her body was frequently nervous. She often had a sense that something terrible was about to happen. It was an ancient, inherited sensation that rarely left her — a traumatic retention. She would soothe that sense of impending disaster in a variety of ways. When she was in the kitchen, she would hum — not a steady tone, but entire melodies. As a small child, if I knew the song she was humming, sometimes I would hum along with her, and my body would experience safety and settledness. It felt like a sacred ritual, imbued with meaning and purpose."

Isaiah 12:2-6 is a hymn, a song sung by a people in exile that anticipates their return home. Even though Isaiah 12 falls within the first division of the book of Isaiah, it is unlike the material around it. Interpreters believe it was composed later than First Isaiah, during the Babylonian

exile, and then added to chapter 12 to aid the narrative flow of the text. The text can be understood as a doxology, a ritualistic hymn sung by a people in need of hope.

It is unsettling to be far from home. It is difficult on both mind and body to go without comfortable and familiar routines. The singer of this hymn celebrates God as our salvation, but also uses the music to will himself into trusting and not being afraid. Like Menakem's grandmother humming in her kitchen, the singing of this hymn can settle and soothe nerves.

I've noticed how long the last hymn of a church service stays with me. Without thinking, I find myself humming its tune long after worship is over. Unlike other songs that become annoying earworms that I want to get out of my head, humming these hymns brings me joy—they also feel good in my throat and chest. Their familiar tunes soothe and settle me, connecting me to my faith tradition and to all those who sung these hymns before me.

“Shout aloud and sing for joy. Sing praises to the Lord.” On this third Sunday of Advent, the prophet Isaiah encourages us to participate in an embodied faith ritual that does us more good than we realize.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What feelings stir within you as you read this passage?
2. In this season of Advent, as we wait for the Christ child to be born, what feels unsettled? In what ways do you feel disconnected in body and mind?
3. What does the singing of hymns mean to you? How does it feel to you?