

Abandoned By Every Good Spirit
Sermon for the 4th Sunday after Easter: Cantate
Sermon Text: 1 Samuel 16:14-23



Now the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and a harmful spirit from the Lord tormented him. ¹⁵And Saul's servants said to him, "Behold now, a harmful spirit from God is tormenting you. ¹⁶Let our lord now command your servants who are before you to seek out a man who is skillful in playing the lyre, and when the harmful spirit from God is upon you, he will play it, and you will be well." ¹⁷So Saul said to his servants, "Provide for me a man who can play well and bring him to me." ¹⁸One of the young men answered, "Behold, I have seen a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite, who is skillful in playing, a man of valor, a man of war, prudent in speech, and a man of good presence, and the Lord is with him." ¹⁹Therefore Saul sent messengers to Jesse and said, "Send me David your son, who is with the sheep." ²⁰And Jesse took a donkey laden with bread and a skin of wine and a young goat and sent them by David his son to Saul. ²¹And David came to Saul and entered his service. And Saul loved him greatly, and he became his armor-bearer. ²²And Saul sent to Jesse, saying, "Let David remain in my service, for he has found favor in my sight." ²³And whenever the harmful spirit from God was upon Saul, David took the lyre and played it with his hand. So Saul was refreshed and was well, and the harmful spirit departed from him.

There are days when I feel like every good spirit has left me. Instead, it seems as though there is a big party of little devils within me that all want to make trouble. Sometimes they cause sadness, sometimes they cause accidents or other coincidences, which can be summarized with Murphy's Law: "anything that can go wrong will go wrong!" In daily life, it's devils like these that steal my freshly made sandwich from the fridge and mysteriously make my socks disappear into the depths of the washing machine or they knock over the beautiful vase on the edge of the table... The worst part is not just that these little devils can't be pinned down, the worst thing is that they are so deeply established in my life that I can't place the blame on them because if I did that, then I would come very close to placing the blame on myself. It was a similar situation for King Saul. Although he was a successful king and no one could criticize him, the problem was not with his army but in his heart. Since not everything was OK, his servants quickly realized that things could not go on like this. "The king is not well. He can't fulfill his leadership duties anymore," people said about Saul. The Bible concisely explains the origin of Saul's condition: "The Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul." One could also say that Saul suffered a spiritual sickness. His illness had less to do with a physical illness of his brain or body and more to do with problems in the realm of his faith.

One could say that he went through a spiritual crisis or a crisis of faith. He had this feeling that his prayers were no longer being heard by God and that he was abandoned by God. The Spirit of the Lord was no longer with him. There are many examples of people who must live and suffer in this way far from God's Spirit. Such examples can't only be classified in the silly category which I initially compared to small mistakes at home. A state of being abandoned by God Himself can actually exist. Extreme examples are sects who isolate their members and force fanatical beliefs on them. Such abandonment by God can't just be a marginal phenomenon, but it can also happen that whole nations or eras appear as if they were abandoned by God. Martin Luther wrote about the Catholic Church during his life: "They want to force the whole world to believe their teachings and yet teach nothing but vain idolatry." Such abandonment by God can also be subtle, hiding behind so-called good laws and commandments that make it appear that if you follow these rules, then you are on the right side. The story's end is always the same: God leaves the house, the people live without God, they lose their faith, they can't pray anymore, and they sink into depression and melancholy.

The story of Saul is a fascinating account that illustrates how wisely and accurately the servants of the king analyzed the problem and how they also came up with the right therapy for the king. The solution for the king was music! Apparently, these people already knew long before music therapy was a thing that music can be healing to the soul. Help came from the servants in the king's house: an unknown servant knew a shepherd named David who was

tending sheep somewhere far away and who possessed a special gift for music. The king's servant was convinced that David would help the king. So David was introduced into the palace as a servant of the king. Although he was completely unknown before, David made a huge leap and was promoted directly into a favorable role within the palace. He not only passed the probationary period but was also appointed as the King's personal armor bearer, which was a very privileged position at the time. And the best of all was that the king felt better. Not only was he better, but it also meant that the harmful spirit had left him. In this portion of the text, it says that the music refreshed Saul. That reminds me of the most famous of King David's Psalms, Psalm 23. It says there: "He restores my soul..." (Psalm 23:3a) We don't know if David sang Psalm 23 for King Saul but it is very probable that he sang at least some Psalms because David ultimately wrote 73 of the 150 Psalms. Even if David hadn't sung from the book of Psalms, music alone also had the power to heal the king, for the music of the Psalms can express praise, thankfulness, repentance, and trust even without words. Martin Luther certainly attributed very high value and impact to music. Luther even wrote: "But of music it is to be said that next to the Word of God, music deserves the highest praise, because it is powerful and mighty in all the movements of the heart." The deceased former St. Thomas church cantor, Georg Christoph Biller, answered similarly when asked the question why so many non-Christians came to the motets in St. Thomas church on Fridays and Saturdays. Biller answered: "The music of Bach expresses the highs and lows of all human feelings so that everyone can relate to it."

I can imagine that on this same level, the music of David also had an effect on King Saul. This story is fascinating on many levels. First, it's exciting because in a situation where it was very clear that God had left the scene, He still is at work with His holy plan. From this we can deduce that even in situations where it appears as if God has forsaken us, it is not so in reality. Earlier I spoke about spiritual illnesses. It may well be that we are living in a time of spiritual drought and illness but even if that were so, there are the quietest and subtlest tones of faith and God's guidance, for God is always there, even in the worst times. We see this plan of God's most clearly in Jesus Christ. It has also been said of Jesus that He was abandoned by every good spirit, He was abandoned by His closest friends, and ultimately by God too. On the cross, Jesus sang a Psalm written by David: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matt. 27:46) With this, Jesus Himself reached out His reconciling hands to those who feel rejected by God from all time and sang a song of mourning with them. He sang Psalm 22 by King David which talks about this same feeling of being rejected by God but also about the confidence that we are still in God's hands, especially in hopeless situations, and can rely on His guidance. Whether David also sang Psalm 22 with King Saul and whether King Saul also recognized his own hopelessness through the sounds of grief and the hopeless cry of "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" is unknown. Yet the music helped him. It says in the Bible that Saul and David harmonized together. Saul didn't know that he had brought the new candidate for king into his court. But both got along well with each other. Saul loved David and music brought them both together even though they had fundamentally different destinies.

Today, God invites us to sing a song with David and with so many others. The Sunday of Cantate invites us to sing with those who are sad, but to also sing a song of faith with those who feel abandoned by God. God invites us to open our hearts, mouths, and ears anew and to listen to His plan. And when all else fails, He invites us to hum a Psalm without words. The Lord is here, and He restores our soul. Amen.