Music hath charms to soothe a savage breast, to soften rocks, or bend a knotted oak. You are probably familiar with this quote from William Congreve. Music is a powerful force. It can calm us or give us energy. Certain music can stir long-held memories, something we are learning about in the care of people with memory loss. I would guess that for most of us, music has always been a part of life. Speaking for myself, my mother and grandmother would sing to me when I was a child, and I in turn sang to my children and grandchildren. I learned to play the clarinet and piano, although I don’t play either one very well. And stories about music are part of my memory. My mother always liked to say that Elvis Presley’s song, Blue Suede Shoes, and I were introduced at the same time. My father would often tell me that one of my earliest musical requests was to listen to “Patty Boom”, better known to the rest of the world as the singer, Pat Boone. Born in 1956, I have been influenced by the music of the late-1950’s through the early-1980’s. Although I enjoy a range of musical styles, some of my favorite music from that era came out of Motown: The Temptations, Diana Ross and the Supremes, Smokey Robinson, The Jackson Five, the Four Tops, Marvin Gaye, and others. Given that many of the artists from Motown had their start in Gospel music, which influenced how they approached rock and roll, it was no surprise to me that as I read through this week’s lectionary readings the song that came to mind for me was the Four Tops’ #1 hit, “Reach Out, I’ll Be There”. While I
realize the Four Tops are singing about a romantic love, I could still hear the words of Scripture echoed in the refrain from that song:

Reach out for me.
I'll be there, with a love that will shelter you.
I'll be there, with a love that will see you through.
I'll be there to always see you through.

In the reading from the Book of John today, Jesus begins by saying, “If you love me.” We forget sometimes that it’s not enough to just say, “I love Jesus.” Or “Jesus is Lord and Savior of my life.” The important part is living the love of Jesus in all that we do and say. [15] “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” Or as The Message by Eugene Peterson puts it: “If you love me, show it by doing what I’ve told you.”

God wants a personal relationship with you. God created you. You are one of God’s creative masterpieces. An artist doesn’t just walk away from his or her piece of art. In Exodus 19:5 God says: “Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples.” He is saying, “I’ll be there for you.”

Many years later that message was repeated for the exiles in Babylon in these familiar verses from the prophet Jeremiah:

11 For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. 12 Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will
listen to you. 13 *You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.* 14 *I will be found by you,*”

Once again, God’s people are told to reach out, God will be there.

In John 15:15-17 Jesus tells the Disciples and us:

“*I’m no longer calling you servants because servants don’t understand what their master is thinking and planning. No, I’ve named you friends because I’ve let you in on everything I’ve heard from the Father. You didn’t choose me, remember; I chose you, and put you in the world to bear fruit, fruit that won’t spoil. As fruit bearers, whatever you ask the Father in relation to me, he gives you.*”

Jesus is saying to the disciples, because you are my friends, “I’ll be there for you.”

Peter exhorts his readers to exhibit the indwelling Spirit of Truth that Jesus spoke of in the way they conducted themselves, to love one another as Jesus commanded. The Way, as the movement of Jesus’ followers was known, was subjected to ridicule and suspicion because of their behavior. The love and generosity that they showed to one another, and even to those outside of their sect, caused people to question just what they were up to. They often found themselves in trouble because of their beliefs. Peter recommends that believers not take offense, but rather have a gentle word in response to the challenges they would meet. They could do this because of the promise of Jesus found in Luke:
14 But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. 15 For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict.

By offering a gentle answer, they would bring shame on those who challenged them. I like the way Eugene Peterson says this in The Message:

**1 Peter 3:15-16 (MSG)**

15 Through thick and thin, keep your hearts at attention, in adoration before Christ, your Master. Be ready to speak up and tell anyone who asks why you're living the way you are, and always with the utmost courtesy.

16 Keep a clear conscience before God so that when people throw mud at you, none of it will stick. They'll end up realizing that they're the ones who need a bath.

The believers were able to face the challenges of their times because they trusted in the presence of the God they could not see. They had the promise of Jesus that they would not be orphaned, that he would be there for them. He had their backs, as we like to say today.

I’d like to share this illustration of how Jesus “has our back”. It’s the story of an orphaned bear cub. An orphaned cub is like a walking buffet for predators. As part of a nature show on TV about the bear cub, the camera showed a hungry-looking mountain lion on the prowl. The viewer could make the connection between the two on their own.
One day the orphan cub encountered a giant male black bear. The little cub cowered at the bear’s sheer mass. The larger bear peered around and seemed to realize that the mother bear wasn’t anywhere to be found. He gave the little cub a friendly nudge. The camera then showed the little bear happily trailing along after the larger one. The adoption papers were signed, sealed and registered at the county seat in that nudge. Papa bear proceeded to show the cub how to grub for insects and how to catch fish and how to scratch his back against a tree.

One day the two bears became separated. The cub began to cry and looked frantically for his new father, but couldn’t find him anywhere. The cub approached a stream where he’d learned to fish and something caught his attention. He looked up to see a mountain lion ready to pounce. That same mountain lion had stalked the cub for the entire show. There was no way that mountain lion would’ve gone for that cub with Papa bear around, but now….

The camera zoomed in on the cub. He automatically mimicked the posture of his adopted father when threatened. He stood on his hind legs and bared his teeth. Then, in the exact same way his new father would have done, this cub let loose a mighty growl that should have reverberated throughout the forest. But, only a tiny bear cub squeak came out.

Well, you know what was coming. But, to everybody’s astonishment the mountain lion lowered his head and ran off in the opposite direction.

The camera panned back to the proud little cub still standing tall on his hind legs. And then all the viewers saw what that little cub Could Not: a few yards behind him, at full, ferocious height, his sharp, white teeth bared in a snarl, stood Daddy bear. He may not have made a sound, but he was there.
And even though the cub couldn’t see his father, his father stood guard, protecting his young. The little cub had power available greater than anything he could produce on his own. There was a greater power watching over him.

We may not see or hear the presence of God, but the power and presence of God is always available to us as baptized believers. No matter how frightened or alone we feel, no matter how much we feel abandoned or how weak or powerless we believe we are, that doesn’t mean the Spirit isn’t here.

During this time of pandemic, many people are feeling afraid and alone, especially in light of stay-at-home orders which limit our contact with others that can leave us with a feeling of abandonment. But we have the promise of Jesus that we are, in fact, never truly alone. For those who love him, keeping his commandments, he will be there. Again, I hear the words to that song running through my head:

Reach out for me.
I'll be there, with a love that will shelter you.
I'll be there, with a love that will see you through.
I'll be there to always see you through.

God has given us the remedy for our fear and feelings of isolation. God’s love will shelter us from life’s storms, whether they be physical, financial, emotional, or relational. Even though we may not be delivered from the trials that face us, God will see us through to the other side of whatever has frightened us, saddened us, or brought us grief. God will even see us through this current pandemic.
With the knowledge that we are not alone, we hold tight to this truth, that when we reach out in the name of Jesus Christ, he’ll be there with an undying love. His love will give us hope in the middle of our trials. His love will give us the courage to share the Good News with others. His love will carry us through to the end of our days, no matter what will come in this world. So, today reach out to the Son of God, who blesses us with the indwelling Spirit of Truth. Rest in his love and care, hear him saying to you, “Reach out to me. I’ll be there.”

Dear Lord, you have promised to always be there for us. In good times and not so good times, you are with us even when we can’t see or feel your presence. Help us to remember that when we are sad or afraid all we have to do is reach out to you and you’ll be there to love us through whatever our trials might be. Thank you for your faithfulness to us. We praise you in the name of Jesus Christ. AMEN

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