



Season 03: Episode 1 | Brian Doerksen | Scripture and the Art of Worship

Hello and welcome to Scripture Untangled, a podcast by the Canadian Bible Society. My name is Joanna la Fleur. I'm a friend of the Canadian Bible Society and I'll be your guide for today's episode.

Today we're speaking with prolific songwriter and global worship leader Brian Doerksen. We can't wait to bring you this content. We really think it's going to richly strengthen you and bless you.

But let me tell you a little bit more about Brian before we dive into the conversation. Brian is a songwriter, recording artist, and songwriting instructor as founder of Unlocking Your Songs. His songs are known and sung internationally in faith communities of all kinds, so you may know some of them, including, *Come Now Is The Time To Worship*, *Refiner's Fire*, *Hope Of The Nations*, and *The River*, just to name a few.

But most of all, Brian loves spending time with his high school sweetheart Joyce. They have been married 38 years, and Brian and Joyce have four adult daughters and two adult sons who both have Fragile X Syndrome. So, in this episode, Brian gets very personal about his faith journey, doubt, struggle, how he wrestles with Scripture to untangle it for himself and offer it back to congregations in song as he untangles and re-stitches it together in poetry.

We think you're going to be richly strengthened and blessed by his reflections in this episode. So don't miss at the end of the episode where Brian plays a song for us that

Scripture Untangled

Season 03: Episode 1 | Brian Doerksen | Scripture and the Art of Worship

hasn't yet been released. Please enjoy the episode and share it with your friends or on social media.

Joanna la Fleur: Brian Doerksen, welcome to Scripture Untangled. It's a joy, a privilege to have you and talk with you today.

Brian Doerksen: Great to be with you.

Joanna la Fleur: Before we dive too much further in, can you give us some context? Who is Brian and where are we finding you, you know, in this moment of your life? Where, literally, where are you?

Brian Doerksen: Well, that's a good question and it's an important question to me because place actually really matters. I'm talking to you from our home in Abbotsford, British Columbia.

I was four years old when my parents bought a little old farmhouse on five acres and that's where I'm speaking to you from. I've spent my whole life kind of anchored on this little piece of land and it's a great, great gift. And yet, like any place in the world, there's also pain in the story.

Like this, the house that I'm speaking to you from was built by an 18-year-old Japanese man named Mr. Kawano. Maybe a longer answer than you were asking for, but he built it in 1937, and we all know what happened shortly after that, right? World War II broke out and one day Canadian officials showed up at this door and took him and his family away to internment camps. And, you know, go forward years later, okay? I'm a boy, I'm playing in the attic, and I find Japanese newspapers and I go and I ask my dad, what is this? He goes, oh, Japanese people built this house, but it was taken from them by the government and sold to a war vet who sold it to somebody else who eventually sold it to our family.

And I'm looking at him as a boy going, that's not right. And he goes, yeah, no, it wasn't right. And a seed was planted on that.

Scripture Untangled

Season 03: Episode 1 | Brian Doerksen | Scripture and the Art of Worship

I want to personally express to a relative of the person who built this house, my sorrow over the injustice and over the calamity of war. And fast forward year 2000, we've moved back from London, England. We're here with our six young children.

And one day a Japanese man drives up onto the property and gets out with a Caucasian woman and two mixed race kids. And he comes up, you know, I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry to bother you.

My name is Mr. Kawano. And I'm like, we've been waiting for you. And I launch into my expression of sorrow over what happened to them.

And he goes, stop. And he pulls out one of these bricks, like old cell phones. This is the beginning of cell phone.

You can tell him yourself. That's my father. Hands me the phone.

He's in a retirement home in Toronto, Ontario. And I have the most incredible conversation with him expressing the sorrow and expressing the joy of what it means to live on this home and to live in the shade of the Ginkgo Balboa tree that he planted in 1937. One of my favorite trees and just all the trees that I've planted on this property.

So, you know, place means a lot to me. The story of the place. And of course, we could go even further back to injustices with indigenous people.

So, it's both an incredible gift and, but you have to take in the whole history of a place when you, when you're there. But this is where I'm talking to you from and where I make music. And, yeah.

Joanna la Fleur: Well, Brian, I didn't expect that story. I couldn't have known. Asking you, you know, a simple question, you get a, you know, thank you for the depth of your answer.

Scripture Untangled

Season 03: Episode 1 | Brian Doerksen | Scripture and the Art of Worship

You didn't just give us the surface. I can't wait for the rest of the conversation. If that's where you're at, if only a simple question, like, where am I speaking to you from gets us to there.

I can't wait. You know, and what that's, what strikes me about that is part of the story of your life and ministry that people might know and sort of in some ways where people might know you from is that you did this thing with the Vineyard churches and you moved to the UK for a while. So, when we talk about sense of, of home or space, you went away from this place you're in and then you've later come back.

And there was this, you know, I'd tell you, I'd love to know a little bit more about really what happened to you when you went away, how God was working in your life. And I mean, the whole conversation we're having today is about Scripture and the arts coming together and we'll begin to, to move closer into that subject. But, but part of the story people know of you is, okay, he went to the UK Vineyard churches.

There were these songs you wrote that became hugely meaningful to people all around the world. And now you're back where, where you began. So, tell us a little bit about how that shaped your story with God.

Brian Doerksen: Wow. I'll try not to go too far down any trails, but I, you know, yes, there was definitely a huge shift in us. We had tried to launch a musical, a musical called *Father's House*, which was birthed out of both my interactions with people who really had experienced the father wound, you know, they were, came from broken families, fathers who were unfaithful and I had this stirring in my spirit to write music and a story about a good father and about healing of that wound.

And we succeeded initially with the album *Father's House*, which was my first solo album. Then we did a musical and then some professional theatre people saw it and they loved it, but they said we needed to work on a number of aspects of the project, which we did. And then we tried to launch it professionally and we, it collapsed and

Scripture Untangled

Season 03: Episode 1 | Brian Doerksen | Scripture and the Art of Worship

we lost over a million dollars, including the first home that Joyce and I had built separately from this family home that we're living in now.

This was in Langley, British Columbia, 30 minutes west of here. So, we were on the verge of bankruptcy, and we were invited to go to the UK to train songwriting worship leaders. And I was amazed that they wanted to hire me after we had this very public launch and then collapse and supposed failure.

But so I went to the UK, just, I would say broken. We had just found out that our youngest, our son at that time, child number three, which will be eventually of six, had fragile X syndrome and would require care for the rest of his life. So, I went to the UK with, there was a first batch of songs of mine that was living kind of in the church, *Faithful One, Refiner's Fire, I lift my eyes up*.

But I had, you know, that was kind of season one of that, but now I had tried this musical, and it had collapsed and I had, you know, got the stuffing knocked out of me. And the news about my son.

So yeah, so that's how we arrived in the UK, not knowing a soul. And it was on, not that long into our time there when one day I was walking the streets of London and all of a sudden, I had the same, similar experience that I had on the day when I wrote *Refiner's Fire*, which all of a sudden, the air around my physical body was crackling with electrical, like electrical type energy.

It's hard to even put it into words. It's just like you're just walking, I'm waking up, it's London, England, there's cars honking, I'm walking along the sidewalk and all of a sudden, it's happening. And I hear, you know, I'm sitting at my piano here, so I'll play, "Come," you know, "now is the time to worship."

And it's like in this crackling energy, I'm hearing this come, and I'm like now, and I remember literally looking to the heavens going now? Now? You know, now is the time? And my question back then now was, I'm a mess. Like I'm barely hanging on to my faith.

Scripture Untangled

Season 03: Episode 1 | Brian Doerksen | Scripture and the Art of Worship

I'm so disoriented. I'm in a new land where I don't know anybody. I have no personal friends that I have history with here.

Now? You know, and I came back home after that walk and ran over to the piano, you know, plunked out the melody. And I had to try and remember it. I had no recording device because I had to walk my kids to school, you know? Anyway, that was the beginning almost of my rebirth into writing songs, some of the other songs that kind of like I'm known for, but they came in the context not of me being confident, me being together, me being certain.

They came in a context of me being utterly bewildered and confused. And yet there was that call again, and I tried to respond. So.

Joanna la Fleur: Well, and what you're describing, I feel like a lot of people listening to you right now are thinking, that's me, or that has been me.

You know, the last few years have been disorienting, upending for a lot of people, whether that's work and life and rhythms, or it's been financial, it's been health things. Church has seemed to have is redefining itself in the Canadian space right now. There's a lot of this, where am I? Who am I? God, where are you in the midst of this, kind of happening? And, you know, it strikes me that one of the things that we all can keep going back to is these songs.

And I think often it's because these songs, they speak to something like the deeper truth. Like when you're singing that "*Come Now is the Time to Worship*," it is this call to worship, but you're offering theology, you're offering Scripture, you're offering truth in a way that feels more accessible in some way, where people don't know how to process it. They don't know what Bible verse to read.

It's like you're translating it for them. I'm not sure if that's how you set out to do it, but I'd love to get into that. As you say, like that song, you're walking down the road in the midst of your life moment, this difficult situation that you're in, and then this song comes to you.

Scripture Untangled

Season 03: Episode 1 | Brian Doerksen | Scripture and the Art of Worship

I'd love to understand more about how that interplays for you. You're thinking of the people, or you're in Scripture yourself, and then a song comes out of that, or you're walking down the street, and a song comes to you. Can you share more about that process of how you're trying to translate your experience with God to people?

Brian Doerksen: Wow.

I mean, first of all, it's very, very rare that a song comes to me. The way I describe it is a seed comes to me. A seed falls into the soil of my heart, my mind.

I always say, I train songwriters too, and I say to songwriters that I'm teaching and training. God doesn't give us songs. He gives us seeds, and what happens to the seed depends upon the quality of soil into which it falls, and to whether it's nurtured well, whether it's watered, all of that.

So, these moments come like a seed. Maybe it's a lyrical phrase, or it comes maybe even with a melody, like *Come Now's the Time* did. But then it's like the writing out of the full song is what's in the soil of my heart.

What Scriptures are there? How have I encountered and experienced God in the world and in Scripture and with other people? And then all of that gets brought into then the writing process, which also is a craft, right? So, it's like any type of writing, songwriting is a craft that you also have to learn, and you can be mentored in it by somebody who has experience, and you can be mentored formally, and you can be mentored informally just by listening to other people. But whether the song is explicitly Scripture or not, some of those, like you said, that those theologies, those Scriptures are embedded in the foundations of what it is I'm trying to say in that song.

And then I can take you know, I can take days, weeks, months refining it, you know, like just singing it over and over again until every word, every note feels like it's a fit, like it's like everything's saying the same thing, you know, all great pieces of art have a unity to them.

Scripture Untangled

Season 03: Episode 1 | Brian Doerksen | Scripture and the Art of Worship

They feel like a cohesive single thing that they're expressing. And that's the goal too of a songwriter. And just as it's the goal of a painter, or a sculptor, or a novelist, you know, we, us artists, we are trying to speak.

And in this context of say, our faith, we're trying to speak the one thing that inspired us in that moment, that flash of inspiration. That, oh, I want to sing a song that says that whatever that one thing is. Yeah.

Joanna la Fleur: Well, when you're talking about this, you're describing drawing on like a lifelong well. And it seems like the theme is even this foundation, the foundation of the home you're living in, the foundation of your faith. What are some of your earliest memories of, of the faith, of the Bible? Who introduced you to the Bible? I'd love to, for you to share more about where you were taught it originally.

Brian Doerksen: Well, answering that question is going to mean telling you a couple of stories about my mom, uh, which I'm very, very happy to say. Uh, one of my, my earliest memories of the Scriptures are not from reading them myself, but by looking into the face of my mother as she was reading. She, I can just picture her over there on the couch where, in fact, we have that, some of that same furniture still and where she would sit, and there was just something when, her Bible was open.

There was something about her face that, that, that attracted me to what she was experiencing in that moment. And now by this, I don't, I can't remember exactly how old I was. I would have had these experiences multiple times through my childhood, my teenage years, my adult years.

And then one day, you know, mom's telling, I'm, I can't remember whether she told me this directly, or I was just in the room hearing this, but when my mom was a young woman, before she became a mother, she went to Bible school in Winnipeg. And at one point the president of the Bible school said to her, it's too bad you're a woman. You would make an amazing preacher, teacher of Scripture.

Joanna la Fleur: Wow.

Scripture Untangled

Season 03: Episode 1 | Brian Doerksen | Scripture and the Art of Worship

Brian Doerksen: And I remember hearing that later and going, wow, like, oh, we've got a long way to go. And, you know, fast forward to my mom's memorial service, where two women, two different women, one, her daughter-in-law, my brother's wife, and another woman led the service.

My mom found a way over and over again to lead, to impact, to share Scripture. She was a part of a group called Lydia Fellowship, which was interesting because her name was Agnes Lydia. Her maiden name was Unger, married name Doerksen.

And she found a way throughout her far too short of a life, she passed away at 77, almost 10 years ago, to influence, to impact, to communicate Scripture in ways that was not like, there's something sometimes, and it's maybe a bit of a stereotype, but men preachers are often, they use Scripture like a bullhorn, you know, they just like blast it. And my mom always used Scripture like a grace-filled invitation. Like it was like she was looking, she was constantly searching the Scriptures for the invitations, for the come.

And I'm an introvert, I'm shy, I'm highly sensitive. And it was my mom's practicing of faith and my mom's reading of Scripture and praying Scripture that most imprinted my life, I think. And just one last little story I want to tell you before we move on, because this is how it kind of came to the end with her when she was lying there on her bed dying.

And I had been in Europe on tour, and I got the call that she had, I knew she was sick. And I had asked her, you know, Mom, I don't want to go, you're not well. And she looked at me like, you must go, you're going to share grace and love with the people in Europe, and you won't be gone that long, and I'll see you when you get back.

And I got the call one night as I was literally on my way onto a stage in front of hundreds of people in Switzerland. She's going downhill fast. If you want to see her again, you better get here.

Scripture Untangled

Season 03: Episode 1 | Brian Doerksen | Scripture and the Art of Worship

And I sent a message to my travel agent, booked me on the first flight tomorrow morning, got on that plane, got there about 48 hours before she passed. But she wasn't at this point able to communicate anymore. So, I lay beside her on her bed in her apartment for hours and I just lay there and I prayed.

I held her hand and I knew she'd want me to sing. And she had already told me what songs, she wanted me to sing my song *Eternity* at her funeral. But anyway, so I sang that, I sang *Faithful One*, I sang some of what our favorite songs are, and I ran out of words, and I was just there and I didn't know what to do.

And then this, I remembered, oh, Matthew 11, verse 28 to 30 is, you know, "are you tired?" Well, in the NIV, it says, "come to me all who are weary and I will give you rest." And I had written a song a few years before called *Enter the Rest of God*. And all of a sudden, I thought, I'm going to sing these, these are, this is not only Scripture, these are the words of Jesus.

And I'm going to sing this over my mom. And I'm also singing it as giving her permission to die. You know, are you tired? Worn out and empty? Is your soul weary? Have you tried releasing your burdens? You know, this is, this is the song, you know, I am, I am the rest you need. I am the Prince of Peace. Enter the rest of God.

And I just, oh boy, I'm going to lose it now.

It just hit me, you know, that it was important that I gave her permission. She didn't want to die because she wanted to keep living and interacting with us and her grandchildren. And yet this, this condition that she had been battling for 10 years, but I gave her permission.

And I, it was at that moment that I needed Scripture to sing over her, to give her the permission to enter the rest of God. And she passed away shortly after that. And, uh, but yeah, so it's my mom, you know, what an incredible, uh, person she was and, um, so, so grateful for her example.

Scripture Untangled

Season 03: Episode 1 | Brian Doerksen | Scripture and the Art of Worship

Joanna la Fleur: Yeah. Thanks for sharing. You know, we're seeing the story of, uh, her life, her love of Scripture, the way it impacted her, as you said, it was on her face.

This draws you in to, uh, really a lifetime of pursuing the One that she loved as well as she introduced God to you and through the Scriptures and through her life. And then right to the very end, the songs, the Scriptures that you're singing over her to bless her as she went to Jesus. Um, I think of that in terms of how you're leading congregations.

You know, I know sometimes you're leading more like a concert or a worship night that the focus is on the music, but sometimes, uh, and many times for those who are leading worship, it's in the context of a, a service with Scripture, uh, with the preaching, with the whole, the whole liturgy of the day. Um, and how do you, like as a worship leader, when you're bringing those songs to people, you're trying to say, okay, the pastor today, the ministers speaking out of this passage, how are you choosing those songs, to bring, how do you choose the songs to interplay between the preaching, the Scripture, the whole morning together to offer to people? How, how does that work for you?

Brian Doerksen: Well, I've, I've done all of those roles, right? I've been a pastor. I've been a preaching pastor.

I've been a worship leading pastor, so to speak. And, um, you know, we're having this conversation on a Monday, who knows when people will be listening to this. Just yesterday, and our little faith community, I gave leadership to worship and song, but I, I did it in such a way as I knew what the Scriptures were.

And in our, in our fellowship, we follow the lectionary. So, the Scriptures of the day, um, and one of them, I have a setting that I sing. So, we sang a Scripture.

Well, we actually, we sang yesterday, we sang two of the songs we sang were basically settings of Scripture. So, I'm always looking at trying to find the best way to

Scripture Untangled

Season 03: Episode 1 | Brian Doerksen | Scripture and the Art of Worship

keep those things integrated. I don't see, I don't see a worship gathering, a community comes together.

I don't see them as, as silos, you know, oh, we're going to have our praise time over here. And we're going to do our, we're going to do that part. And then we're going to check that box.

And now we're going to do this part over here. And again, it's like any great piece of art. There's a unity to it.

There's a cohesiveness to it. And Scripture is a, one of the best ways to provide that in our worship gatherings. A, of course, reading Scripture is an act of worship, singing it, and then singing songs inspired by those Scriptures.

So, like in our faith community, we use Scripture, like we follow the lectionary. So, we read Scripture as worship. We sometimes do what's called *Lectio Divina*, you know, where we take time with the Scripture and we read it multiple times.

And we, it's almost like you're chewing it. You're looking for that phrase or that verse that you can really focus on. And then, like I said, and then we're sometimes just literally singing a version of a paraphrase of that Scripture.

Now, as a songwriter and as a songwriting instructor, one of the traps that happens is people think, oh, I want to sing Scripture. And they don't really take on board the craft of songwriting and what's required to paraphrase and shape that Scripture to make it singable. Right.

You know, you read some of the history books of like the church in the Middle Ages and how they would sing the metrical Psalms. And I mean, I, the *Psalms* are incredible, right? It's a songbook in the heart of the Bible. But if you don't take the time to really make that Scripture sing by shaping it melodically and paraphrasing it, it's going to be like, you're trying to force something.

Scripture Untangled

Season 03: Episode 1 | Brian Doerksen | Scripture and the Art of Worship

So, you still have to do the work of the artist, but you do it with great respect for the source material. You know, like typically when I'm setting a Scripture to song, I'll open up on my laptop, six different translations in columns, and then I'll look for phrasing that seems to sing. And then where I can't find anything in the translations, I will paraphrase it myself because I don't, you know, and then some people get, you know, get really uptight like, oh, you don't want to change the Word of God, you know? And I go, well, that's actually not a very helpful way of thinking about it because every single time we read a Scripture or we read a new translation of the Scripture, we're interpreting it through even just the way we speak it, with the tone of our voice. So, we're constantly interpreting and paraphrasing, but we're respecting the source because we're going, our heart is to convey the dynamic equivalent of what the people in the first culture would have heard when they heard that Scripture to what our people and our culture needs now.

So there, there's a lot, I guess there's a lot of things at play.

Joanna la Fleur: Yeah. And what I'm hearing you describe is kind of the name of this whole podcast, Scripture Untangled.

I'm hearing you say the work of the artist is to wrestle, untangle, maybe tangled in a different way. You're playing with the threads and trying to find a way to bring it to people that is accessible, that allows them to take it home. You're not trying to water down; you're trying to untangle what it is.

Brian Doerksen: And I actually, you know, that concept, because I, so over time, it's almost like the debris of circumstance and layers of history tangles it, right? Like it just gets all, and you need time and you need help. I mean, I do the same thing with my songwriters that I teach. I have a program called *Unlocking Your Songs*, right? Like it's like, because I believe that songs are in people, sometimes they need help to be unlocked.

It's like that. It's a similar thing. We need to untangle it and we need, you know, help.

Scripture Untangled

Season 03: Episode 1 | Brian Doerksen | Scripture and the Art of Worship

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Joanna la Fleur: So, when I think about that, the other piece of this untangling, and as you've been, you know, sharing about your own journey, it has not all been easy. You're a deep feeler.

You've gone through your own loss, pain, regret, changes. So, with, you know, with the Bible, have you ever really doubted the Bible? Has it always been with you? Some people it is, for others they wrestle with it. Or, you know, how do you deal with those confusing and troubling parts or parts, something you may not, you read it, but you don't agree with it.

How do you, how do you wrestle with that?

Scripture Untangled

Season 03: Episode 1 | Brian Doerksen | Scripture and the Art of Worship

Brian Doerksen: Well, absolutely. I've experienced that kind of doubt and that kind of wrestling. I mean, we live in a world that is complex.

And when I, if I read somewhere in Scripture, you know, maybe it's in the lectionary for that Sunday. And all of a sudden, it's like, oh, that's a violent story, you know? And I think like, how do I square this with the God that I've experienced of mercy and kindness? And then there's this, you know, Old Testament, crazy, you know, violent episode. And I, so a couple of things.

One is I first of all, I'm honest that this troubles me and I don't try and immediately quell my troubledness. I don't try and pretend, oh, but it's the Bible. So, it's, you know, no, this really troubles me.

And then I, I mean, I've, you know, I've got some scholar friends who sometimes I'll go to and my wife's sister is a doctor, has a doctorate in, in Biblical language and theology. Sometimes we'll have some conversations like, how do you square this? And, then I think about things like the arc of what Jesus came to show us that, and he would say, well, you have heard it said, but I say to you, you know, so I go, whatever I'm troubled with in the Bible, I try and also put Jesus, so to speak. I try and use, I say, okay, how would Jesus tell this story? If it's a, if, you know, if it's an Old Testament story that He didn't literally comment on.

I mean, when my mom was alive, we would have conversations about this. And now since her passing, sometimes when I'm troubled by it, I literally close my eyes, and I see my mom's face and I see my mom. I try to imagine how would she wrestle with this and how can I, you know, so it's, I mean, it's not, it's not an easy thing.

Like people who kind of say, oh, you know, all we need to do is like read the Bible every day and just do everything it says. And they kind of try and oversimplify it. I go; it's a lot more complicated than that.

And I remember, for example, I think pre the birth of our first special needs son, I would often go to the Bible looking for promises that were rooted in certainty. And

Scripture Untangled

Season 03: Episode 1 | Brian Doerksen | Scripture and the Art of Worship

then I had a son who would require support for the rest of his life and who, in one sense, we felt like God had spoken to us before he was born. You're going to have a son at this time next year and you're, he's going to help in his father's work was the word that my wife had a year before he was born.

And so, we named him Benjamin Brian, and he was born exactly when Joyce had felt he would be. And it turns out that Benjamin, you know, literally he can't help with my work. He can't speak.

He, other than some phrases, he gets highly distressed over changes in his rhythm. He requires full-time care, but at the same time, caring for him, walking with him has impacted my ministry. It's just in a completely different way because when people heard that initial story, our friends, oh, you're going to have a son.

Oh, you feel like he's going to share. Oh, what instrument is he going to play? And how is he going to like, you know, no. So, my view, even through that experience was I go to Scripture now less for certainty and more out of looking for the invitations for grace, looking for curious, like, where am I going to find the whispers of God and grace in this story, in this passage that will help me in my times of confusion? But yeah, do you know what I mean? Like, it's kind of like my, and my worship songs went from declarations of what I know to more expressions.

I don't know, but I trust. And there was a song I wrote called *Your Faithfulness*. I don't know what this day will bring.

Will it be disappointing or filled with long for things? That song was connected to the birth of our child, number six, our second son. And we had a second son praying and hoping for a son without fragile X syndrome. And I say, you know, to use the language of the Psalms, we prayed for deliverance from fragile X syndrome and we were not delivered.

Scripture Untangled

Season 03: Episode 1 | Brian Doerksen | Scripture and the Art of Worship

How long Oh Lord, but just like the Psalmist, you start with that and then you transition at some point, but I trust in your unfailing love, you know, so it's all of that kind of wrestling that goes on.

Joanna la Fleur: You know, when I, when I think of that in the context of a worship leader, what strikes me is it's incredibly honest and real, your wrestle. And not that all of that has to be in front of everyone.

Some of that has to be, and should be, and must be private and personal, but there's maybe a stereotype in the modern worship world and the modern worship service and evangelical type circles of the happy clappy thing, you know, the worship leader, who's all smiles and skinny jeans. I mean, I'm being the stereotype, but it's all, everything's great. Let's come on and celebrate today.

And, that isn't always how people come to a worship service. The people, so, you know, what would you say to those worship leaders? How do they bring themselves, their whole selves, you know, the whole breadth and depth of their experience? What would your encouragement be to other worship leaders about that?

Brian Doerksen: Yeah, I mean, great question. And I think we all are going to do it in slightly different, unique ways.

And that's fantastic. And all you can do is do it from the center of who you are. But when you really care for the people who you're leading, who you're inspiring, then we, A, we need to learn to, just as we learn to celebrate and with those who have a victory or breakthrough or success, we also need to learn to mourn with those who mourn.

We need to have a healthy, what I call, to quote, to kind of rip off the Cazeros, emotionally healthy spirituality. We need emotionally healthy worship music and emotionally healthy song selection, which means like the Psalms, which has one third lament to two thirds songs of praise. You just need a healthy balance of songs of

Scripture Untangled

Season 03: Episode 1 | Brian Doerksen | Scripture and the Art of Worship

gratitude, songs of praise, songs of lament, songs of intercession, songs of repentance.

You know, so like, it's like we're not just expressing one thing, we're expressing humanness, our image of God-ness. And even in the, you know, in Scripture, right, we have examples of the emotional diversity of Our Creator, how He sings over us with joy and He weeps when, you know, Jesus weeping over Jerusalem. We just need to, it's not about us just, just being honest with who we are, though that's important.

It's actually caring for the people we lead. And I had this really formative moment right in the beginning when I was really struggling with even like song selection as a worship leader, because I felt like there just weren't the right type of songs that really expressed not just where I was at, but where our congregation was at. And I felt like they were like, we would import these songs and then we would try and make them work.

But it was always like we were importing some culture that wasn't quite a fit. And I say one of the reasons I have such a passion to train songwriters is because I believe in every congregation, at least half, if not more of the songs you sing should be written from within your own congregation, because then it's an expression of you and your culture and your people. But as I was wrestling with that as a young worship leader and songwriter, I felt this invitation, you know, to, I felt this whispered invitation, you know, lead worship with a whisper and sing over the suffering.

And those two phrases have never left me. So, by the whisper, I mean, lead with a gentleness so that those who are just barely hanging on feel included. Those that are almost on the edge of like falling off, you know, I mean, I was going to say the wagon as the expression goes in the world, but I don't mean it like in terms like an AA meeting, but it's like, you know how you feel like you're on this thing, but you feel like at any moment I could fall off because I'm just not, there's so much uncertainty in my life.

Scripture Untangled

Season 03: Episode 1 | Brian Doerksen | Scripture and the Art of Worship

Or you're really suffering or you're grieving. And obviously the solution isn't like singing sad songs all the time, but it is including sad songs and including honest songs in our song selection. And then just staying in conversation with your people so that you know how those things are being received.

And then growing and learning. I mean, we're going to, you know, I still have so much to learn about all of this. You know, I feel like I'm a beginner still.

Joanna la Fleur: It makes me think of the project your working on with The SHIYR Poets, which is this singing of the Psalms, this idea, as you said, that many of the Psalms are not all happy. There's lament and anger. And, you know, there's some classic ones we quote about dashing our enemies against the rocks.

I'm not sure how you sing that, but this idea of the breadth and the depth of the human experience. And we find that in the Scripture. So why don't we find it in the songs that we sing in sort of that same proportion? I don't know if you have any comment on that, but, you know, just particularly that project, as you worked through the Psalms, anything that struck you as you worked through that, or maybe even what the feedback was from that project as others were hearing you work through singing the Psalms.

Brian Doerksen: Well, the story behind that project in that group was I had gone through my second church blow up split in less than 10 years. And as a result of the second one, I lost my words and I stopped writing songs. I went for about five years where I could not write a new original song.

And a couple of years into that meeting with a couple of friends, we realized we were totally different circumstances, but we were all being drawn to the Psalms. It was the only place we were finding solace and community almost. When we would read the Psalms, we'd go, oh, we're not crazy.

There's other people who have felt their hopes dashed and are confused. That whole, I think Brueggemann talks about the Psalms are Psalms of orientation and Psalms of

Scripture Untangled

Season 03: Episode 1 | Brian Doerksen | Scripture and the Art of Worship

disorientation and Psalms of reorientation. And I was living in the disorientation going how long till I experience reorientation.

And so that was the backstory. So, then we just started writing our own versions, respecting the original songwriter. So, what we decided to do was with each Psalm, we wouldn't edit out big chunks of it because it was there for a reason.

Now, it gets a bit tricky because there's a 3000-year cultural gap between the original song and our cultural context. And if we would have heard the musical setting of that original, there would be so much change. It wouldn't sound like music to us.

So, it has to be updated and paraphrased. But if there's anger in there, then we had to convey that anger. If there was sadness, we had to convey the sadness.

And even in my disorientation, if there was joy there, I was committed to expressing that joy. And we just started doing it in sequence. And it's just, it's been an interesting journey and a good journey, life giving journey.

And the response to it has been mixed. Some people just love it. And some people are offended by it.

Right? Because they go, why are you singing that angry thing or this sad thing or whatever, because it sounds a little, it's not, it's not like a match to the current culture as far as the modern worship movement goes, because all of those messier bits are edited out in modern worship. And all that's left...

Joanna la Fleur: They've been so untangled, everything's in nice, neat rows.

Brian Doerksen: Exactly.

Joanna la Fleur: There's no messiness left.

Brian Doerksen: That's great. That's a great, yeah.

Scripture Untangled

Season 03: Episode 1 | Brian Doerksen | Scripture and the Art of Worship

And the Psalms are more still; there's a bit of tangle going on. You know, there's a bit of turbulence, there's a bit of... And yet, it's that resonance that made me go, oh, I'm not alone. Right? I'm not the only one experiencing this level of gut-wrenching disappointment and confusion when things don't turn out the way I thought they were going to turn out.

Joanna la Fleur: You know, one of my last questions for you here is just, in some ways, you've answered it indirectly. It is a question I want to ask because many, we see the stats in the church in Canada or in the West, many are leaving. Many have said this doesn't matter to them anymore, or it isn't working for them anymore.

You know, Biblical illiteracy, church attendance, however you want to mark it. So, I mean, the question is, in some ways, you've answered, but why do you stay? And we'll leave that as the last question that I would love if you could share this song that you're working on with us as the bridge to our close. Why do you keep at this faith journey?

Brian Doerksen: Well, you know, I could say a couple of things.

One is, you know, well, where else can I turn? You know, this deep sense of a Creator, of that there at the very heart of the universe is love, remains with me, though, the way I describe it for some people, you know, there's been a lot of talk recently about deconstruction and reconstruction. The way I describe it is, like the house in which I live, my life is an ongoing renovation. My faith life is an ongoing renovation.

And occasionally there's a wall inside the house that I go, does that wall really need to be there? What if we change this room around a little bit? Is God afraid of that? Is God afraid of me questioning that? No, I don't think so. And yet, I still long for that deep tap root to change the metaphor to a tree, which is, I mean, trees are all around me on this property. And I think about trees often.

Scripture Untangled

Season 03: Episode 1 | Brian Doerksen | Scripture and the Art of Worship

And I think trees are actually a really important thread in Scripture. From the beginning to the book of Revelation, we have all these things about trees. And I think, you know, the rootedness of it.

And so, there's still something there in the roots, right? Even if I'm in winter, and I'm a deciduous tree, and my branches hold no fruit or no leaves, the roots are still there. So, yeah. And then I catch glimpses in Scripture of that beauty and that love that just keeps calling me.

A little while ago, I was, as we were preparing for Advent, looking at different Scriptures about the Advent season and about just the sense of what's still to come, that we're in need, but provision is coming. And I was struck by this Isaiah passage. Can I just read this for you? And then maybe, and then I'm just gonna, as an example of what we're talking about, I'm just gonna sing a simple melody and a paraphrase kind of this Isaiah passage, Isaiah chapter 40.

I'm reading from the NIV. It says,

"A voice of one calling in the desert, prepare the way for the Lord, make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God."

And then I just almost wept when I read this next phrase, because I just thought, oh, we need this so badly right now in our world.

"Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low, the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain, and the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it."

Obviously, this metaphor isn't about, oh, valleys are bad or, you know, and mountains are bad. It's taken a metaphor of geography and saying, the valley is like a metaphor for those who suffer, those who are downcast, and the mountains are like the proud and those who are misusing power and want status.

Scripture Untangled

Season 03: Episode 1 | Brian Doerksen | Scripture and the Art of Worship

And the prophet is saying, there's coming a time when those who are downtrodden are going to be lifted and those who think they are, you know, kings of the world are going to be humbled. And together, when we actually come together in grace, we're going to experience this. So, and then I just walked over, you know, I was meditating on this passage and I walked over to my piano and a melody came, oh, I guess we're supposed to sing this, you know, or at least I'm supposed to sing it.

I don't want to say any grand royal we; I just found it was important. And then since I did this, I find sometimes I'll be going through life, something will happen and then the song will come to me, and I just sing it. I sing it over my own soul to remind me to be hopeful that these beautiful invitations, these whispered invitations that I saw on the face of my mother when I was a child, that I've experienced for myself through my life, that they are real and that they are ongoing, that they are still being extended to all of us.

Joanna la Fleur: Amazing. Well, Brian, can you share it?

Brian Doerksen: Yeah, I'll sing it. I'm going to, you know, well, I'll just plunk it away on my piano.

I'm normally a guitar player, but I do a lot of my writing on the piano because it helps me think melodically. So, my piano playing simple, but it conveys the essence of the song.

"Someone is calling in the wilderness. Prepare the way for the Lord of love.

Level out the path, for the love of God, prepare the way for the Lord of love.

And every valley shall be filled in, and every mountain be laid low.

And the crooked roads shall be straightened out, and the rugged places shall be smooth, till everybody sees, till everybody knows the compassion of our God.

Scripture Untangled

Season 03: Episode 1 | Brian Doerksen | Scripture and the Art of Worship

This salvation brought by love.

Someone is calling in the wilderness. Prepare the way for the Lord of love.”

Joanna la Fleur: Thank you, Brian.

Thanks so much for sharing your story and opening up a piece of how we all can connect through worship and music and to the Scriptures and then therefore to hear the voice of God for ourselves. Thanks so much for your ministry. And it's just, I know for those listening, this is whether they know it or not, your work and your ministry has connected to their life probably.

And so, we're just so grateful to have a few minutes with you here today.

Brian Doerksen: Oh, thanks for having me. And I've enjoyed the conversation.