

Sing Praise to God Who Reigns Above!

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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

I Chronicles 15: 25-29; Acts 16: 16-25

Good morning! I'm delighted once again to be back in the SPC pulpit!

Some time ago, I decided that if Randy ever invited me to preach here again, I would take the opportunity to share with you, some long-held personal thoughts about the essential role of music in worship... specifically about the importance of music within the worship-life of this congregation.

This morning I have that opportunity!

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Even a cursory study of scripture reveals the undeniable fact that music has always played a central role in the worship-life of the people of God.

In the Old Testament we learn that even when he was a young boy, David was a gifted musician who loved to sing, play the harp and to write songs of praise. The poetic Psalms he wrote remain to this day, some of Judea-Christianity's most beloved expressions of belief!

Shortly after becoming his nation's most famous monarch, David and the Elders of the newly-united 12 tribes of Israel, celebrated the establishment of Jerusalem as Israel's capital city, by bringing Israel's most important religious symbol, the Ark of the Covenant, to the new capital, from the secret place where it had been hidden for safe-keeping.

Listen to how I Chronicles, chapter 15, verses 25-29, records this exuberant incident:

Now King David and the Elders of the people and the commanders of the army went with great rejoicing to bring up the Ark of The Covenant of the Lord from the place where it had been hidden in the house of Obbedom.

David was clothed in fine linen as were also all of the Levites who were carrying the Ark and all of the singers and musicians.

Now David's wife Michal, who was the daughter of Saul, the first King of Israel, was surprised and shocked when she looked out of her window and saw her husband the King and the others, singing and dancing in the streets!

What we read described here in scripture, is a scene of great communal celebration! Yahweh, the God of Israel had brought the Hebrew people out of slavery, had provided them with their own homeland and had then given them a new capital city and now his thankful people were so overcome with emotion, they could not contain themselves!

To the sounds of trumpets, harps and crashing cymbals, they responded with joyous, unrestrained worship, leaping about joyfully singing and dancing in the streets!

“For everything in life, there is a season
a time to weep and a time to sing
a time to mourn and a time to dance!”

* * *

It is a fact that since the dawn of religious history, God's Covenant People have always expressed their faith and belief in God through music coming into the presence of the Almighty with singing, while making a joyful noise before the Lord with sounds of praise!

Today God's people continue this tradition of expressing gratitude and thanksgiving to Almighty God as we raise our voices in song!

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In the New Testament scriptures we also find countless recorded examples of God's people expressing vocal praise and gratitude to God through music.

One of the most curious, audacious examples of the place of music and song in the lives of early Christian believers is found In the Book of Acts, where we read about the Apostle Paul and his friend Silas visiting the Greek city of Philippi.

Paul and Silas found themselves in serious danger after they healed a mentally-ill young slave-girl in the town market place.

Listen again to the Word of God as we find this incident recorded in the 16th Chapter of Acts, verses 16 to 25:

As they were going to a place of prayer in the city of Philippi, Paul and Silas were met by a slave girl possessing a spirit of divination who brought her owners much financial-gain by sooth-saying and fortune-telling.

For many days she followed the two apostles about, hysterically crying out "These men are servants of the High God, and they proclaim to you the way of salvation." Finally, Paul became so annoyed by her utterances and behavior that he turned and said to the evil-spirit within her, "I charge you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour.

But...when her owners saw that their source of financial gain was now gone, they urged a crowd of bullies to attack the 2 apostles. Then the crowd seized Paul and Silas and dragged them before the rulers of they city saying, "These men are Jews and they are disturbing our city."

The magistrates ordered that Paul and Silas should be beaten with sticks, after which they had the two men thrown into prison where their feet and arms were fastened in the stocks.

And so it was that shortly after the hour of midnight, the jailers and other prisoners were astonished when they heard Paul and Silas happily singing hymns of praise to God!

Incredible! Think about the effect that must have had on the other prisoners and on their jailers! After being scorned, beaten, and jailed Paul and Silas didn't fall into a "funk" and begin singing the blues! Instead, at the top of their lungs, they exuberantly began singing hymns of praise and thanksgiving to their God!

Now... I don't know how many of you would begin singing hymns of praise after being beaten, tortured, and jailed ...but I'm not sure that I would do that!

Yet... today, Sunday after Sunday... in both good times and bad, the Christian community of believers worships God, by singing hymns of praise and thanksgiving!

And when this congregation sings hymns of praise it is blessed to have highly-trained and devoted professional musicians and loyal volunteers, who lead us as we worship God! These folks are not giving a performance ...nor are they entertaining us! They are leading us in congregational worship!

This morning I would like to offer some well deserved kudos to the worship leaders who regularly provide this congregation with the wonderful music that helps us to express our faith in God!

While members of this parish have many opportunities to express appreciation to pastor Randy Tremba for his provocative Sunday morning messages and for his loving pastoral care, we don't have many opportunities to express our appreciation to members of our Church Choir, the Psalm 150 Singers and to our 8:30 service pianist Kari Edge, our extraordinary church organist Barbara King or to our outstanding Choir Director Dr. Georgiann Toole all of whom deserve our profound gratitude for inspiring our congregational worship.

Kari, thank you so much for the inspiring music you prepare and play for us every Sunday. You are wonderful and we are fortunate to have you leading us in worship!

This morning, on behalf of all of the members of SPC, I want to especially recognize Dr. Georgiann Toole and Barbara King who Sunday after Sunday provide this congregation with beautiful, inspiring music!

Ask our choir members what they think about Georgiann and Barbara and they will quickly and enthusiastically tell you how fortunate they feel they are, to have Georgiann and Barbara leading and teaching them! The proof of this can be seen in the way our choir noticeably improves week after week! Does anyone here doubt that today our SPC church choir is the finest church choir in town?

Friends... great organ and choral music doesn't just develop automatically in a vacuum. The lovely music we hear and appreciate week after week here at SPC, is the result of years of dedicated study, training, and hours of planning and preparation by both Georgiann and Barbara!

This congregation is truly fortunate to have a skilled, dedicated choir director like Georgiann Toole who really knows her stuff.....and who obviously enjoys what she is doing!

As an ordained minister who spent 4 decades serving as the pastor of a local congregation, I know and appreciate how important it is to have a choir director who goes to great length to see that the weekly selection of anthems and special music fits the theme of the pastor's morning sermon!

Georgiann does this brilliantly week after week after week selecting just the right musical selections and anthems to perfectly support Randy's theme of the day! Georgiann, thanks for what you do for us! You're the best!

And then there's Barbara! Every Sunday morning we sit here and listen in awe to Barbara King's lovely weekly piano or organ intros and preludes which are truly amazing! Still, I wonder how many of you are aware that Barbara comes here to this sanctuary nearly every day of the week to practice for hours what she plans to play the following Sunday morning? Again, Barbara's professionalism doesn't happen accidentally or without extensive preparation!

This congregation is greatly blessed to have Barbara King's talented, devoted skill and dedication leading us in our worship! Barbara...Thanks! We're so fortunate to have you!

And let's not forget the choir members themselves. Week after week they commit themselves to attend Tuesday night choir rehearsals to learn the assigned music and they also come to church early every Sunday morning to rehearse again before the church service begins.

That's real loyalty and dedication! How fortunate this congregation is to have such a loyal, dedicated and talented church choir!

And once again and most importantly our wonderful SPC Choir knows that when they sing anthems on Sunday mornings, they are not putting on a performance they are expressing their faith through music and they are leading this congregation in worship which is an essential distinction we all need to understand and appreciate! To all of the members of our choir we salute and thank you for leading us in worship!

Singing praise to God is one of the basic essential ingredients of Christian worship. Both as a pastor and as a Christian worshiper, I have always appreciated the importance of music in the life of the church.

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All my life I have been surrounded and inspired by music: I grew up and was nurtured in a musical family, and I was taught by my parents to enjoy and appreciate all kinds of music, both secular and sacred. My mother and father both liked to sing, and both played the piano my father not always well but always enthusiastically! My parents afforded me the opportunity to learn how to study and read music and to not only sing but to also play an instrument. My father, my brother and I all played the trumpet and I still fondly remember Sundays in my youth when in our large Evanston, Illinois First Presbyterian Church "The Macdonell-Trumpet-Trio" introduced the four stanzas of the hymn "God of our Fathers!" My sister played the piano and the violin, and usually, at least once a week, the "Macdonell family musical chorale," played together for our own pleasure... while probably irritating most of our neighbors!

Nancy, who is a much better musician than I am also grew-up surrounded by music. She began playing both the piano and flute in early childhood, and she played the flute in high school and college orchestras and later, after coming to the DC area to work at NIH, she was a member of the NIH Symphony Orchestra. All her life she also participated in school, community and church choirs. Today she sings in our SPC church choir and also in the Shepherd University Masterworks Choir. For both of us, music has always been a joyous, important part of our lives and as Christian believers it is an essential part of our worship experience.

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Over the years I have discovered the great power and effect that music has on my life especially on my emotions. There have always been times in my life when my emotional thoughts and feelings could not always be adequately expressed through spoken words.

Singing music playing music or just listening-to or experiencing music have often been the best ways I could emotionally deal with and express my feelings.

And that, in a sense, is what music is all about. It is the language of feelings and emotions! Human beings experience all kinds of feelings through music: Joy and sorrow, Pride and devotion, Love and thanksgiving, Exhilaration and love, Belief and hope! And because Music is the language of our emotions it can touch our lives in ways that nothing else can!

Listen to old, early jazz recordings by: Bessie Smith, Billie Holiday or Joe Williams as they mournfully sing the blues and you can almost imagine what it was like... To live in a Harlem Tenement, or to listlessly hang-out in a Kansas City speak-easy or a pool hall when you didn't have a job, or to experience life that was so hard and cruel, that there was no hope that things would ever improve or get better.

In the same way, try to stifle feelings of national pride when you listen to a marching band playing John Philip Sousa's stirring "Washington Post March" or "The Stars and Stripes Forever!"

Or see if you can remain grim or unhappy when you listen to a well-balanced Barbershop Quartet slid into subtle, smooth chord-changes in perfect four-part harmony as 4 mellow singers blend their voices as they croon: "In the Evening by the Moonlight!"

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Friends, music paints powerful, poignant, nostalgic pictures in our minds:

- I can't listen to the stirring sounds of a Scottish Pipe Band without conjuring-up memories of visiting Glencoe or the Isle of Iona the summer I spent doing graduate-theological-study in St. Andrews, Scotland.

- And when I hear the haunting sounds of an Irish tin-whistle I immediately picture the Glens of Antrim or the River Liffey in Dublin.
- And I cannot hear the songs of the 1960's civil-rights-movement without once again seeing brave, young men and women marching across the Edmund Pettus Bridge over the muddy Alabama River outside of Selma, Alabama... some of them with bodies swathed in bloody bandages even as they sang triumphantly:

“Oh Freedom O Freedom! Before I'll be a slave
I'll be buried in my Grave!
And go home to my Lord, and be Free!”

“We Shall, we shall not be moved! Just like a tree
that's planted by the water we shall not be moved!
“I went down to the County Jail had no money to pay
my bail keep your eyes on the prize O my Lord!”

“We Shall Overcome We Shall Overcome
Deep in my heart, I do believe
that We Shall Overcome Some day!

These are powerful, poignant musical-memories of significant times in my life that I will never forget!

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In the very same way, the Music of the Church also touches and moves us! I've stood in pulpits just like this one all across this country and looked out over sanctuaries filled with worshipers just like you singing hymns and I've seen tears rolling down the cheeks of worshipers for reasons not discernable to me or perhaps even to them!

That's why I believe that music is one of the very special ways God speaks to us... and also provides us with an opportunity to reply to God's divine voice!

Music is just as essential to our worship of God as is the reading or proclamation of Scripture! In fact, when worshippers express their faith in God through music... then music becomes proclamation!

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Would you like to experience the heart-thumping, hope-filled victorious presence of the Living God? Then stand and sing the great Ralph Vaughn Williams hymn to belief in the Resurrection and Eternal Life:

“For All the Saints Who from their Labors Rest,
Who Thee by faith before the world confessed.
Thy name O Jesus be forever blest,
Alleluia Alleluia!”

Or sing Martin Luther's great Reformation hymn confessing faith in God's never-ending Grace... written even as some of his enemies were attempting to force him to recant and others were trying to kill him:

“A Mighty Fortress is Our God,
a bulwark never failing;
Our helper He amid the flood,
of mortal ills prevailing.
For still our ancient foe,
doth seek to work us woe;
His craft and power are great;

And armed with cruel hate,
On earth is not his equal!
Amen!

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Do you need a spiritual lift? hopefully you got one this morning as we began our worship of God by singing Ludwig Van Beethoven's incomparable "Hymn to Joy:"

Joyful, joyful, we adore Thee,
God of glory, God of love;
Hearts unfold like flowers before Thee,
Opening to the sun above.
Melt the clouds of sin and sadness,
Drive the dark of doubt away;
Giver of immortal gladness,
Fill us with the light of day!

This is powerful stuff!... ecclesiastical music dramatically expressing human emotion and feelings as it has done from the very beginnings of religious history!

Friends... when bad or sad things happen to us belief in Christ and the grace of God's grace and love not only assure us that such things cannot overcome us... they allow us to stand with the Apostle Paul in the face of the world's hatred and hostility and to proclaim with him:

"What shall we say to such things? If God be for us, WHO could possibly stand against us." For I am persuaded that neither life or death... or anything else in all creation, can separate us from the love of God though Jesus Christ!"

That is faith that is worth singing about! That's the kind of faith that motivated Martin Luther to sit down and write "A Mighty Fortress is Our God!"

And again... That's why it is so good to a part of a church like this where people love to sing and do it in a congregation with gifted leaders who inspire and teach us how to sing with enthusiasm and ability!

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Friends... we often sing the beloved hymns of the church without having any idea about how they came into being. Not knowing much about the hymns we sing doesn't make our hymns any less lovely or appealing.

But, when we understand the prevailing conditions under which our hymns were written church music gains new power to inspire and deepen our faith.

I want to conclude my sermon this morning by telling you 2 true stories about several of the truly great, beloved hymns of the church.

(1)

First... let me tell you the story about a hymn that has always appeared on virtually every list of the most popular hymns of the church... the hymn "Amazing Grace" written, sometime between the year 1750 and 1770 by the English clergyman Rev. John Newton.

John Newton was a very complex human being, who had not always been a devout, respected church leader. In fact, previous to his life in the ministry, he was a notorious slave trader, the captain of his own slave-ship, a man who bought African slaves in Sierra Leone and then transported them across the seas to Caribbean ports where they were then sold to wealthy plantation owners in the new world.

In his journal for the month of May, 1748, Newton recorded an extraordinary moment when he desperately attempted to steer his ship safely through a violent storm at sea and experienced what he later referred to as "his divine spiritual moment of deliverance."

In the midst of that raging storm when all seemed lost and believing that his ship was about to sink... in great fear for his life Newton prayed to God. "Lord, have mercy upon me!"... and suddenly the storm ceased!

Later, in the safety of his cabin, shaken to the core of his being, Newton recorded in his journal that May 10, 1748 was the moment when God spoke to him through the passing storm and saved his soul!

He never forgot that frightening moment, and 20 years later he sat down and wrote the incomparable words to "Amazing Grace" as both a personal confession of faith... and as a living testimony to what God had done for him that day!

Newton took the words of his hymn and put them to the tune of a song sung by the poor, wretched, human beings he had once bought and sold into slavery, and here is what emerged:

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind but now I see!

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear,
The hour I first believed!
Through many dangers, toils and snares,
I have already come,
'Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home!

This hymn is a powerful statement of both contrition and faith! and hopefully, whenever we sing it we will recall the tragic circumstances that inspired Newton to create it!

(2)

Finally, let me tell you a less familiar story behind the beloved hymn we sang just a few minutes ago... a hymn which just happens to be one of my personal favorites... "O Love That Will Not Let Me Go."

This hymn was written in 1882 by a brilliant, popular Scottish theologian and preacher, the Rev. Dr. George Matheson, whose poignant life-story of unrequited-love and disappointment reads like a Harlequin Romantic Novel!

Born in Glasgow, Scotland in 1842, Matheson began going blind while he was still a young boy... Yet he was such a brilliant student at the Glasgow Academy, the University of Glasgow, and the Church of Scotland Seminary, that in spite of his rapidly-failing eyesight he obtained BA, MA and BD degrees and graduated with high honors from all the schools he attended.

But... his high achievements were only possible because of the extraordinary support he received from a devoted sister, who taught herself Greek, Latin and Hebrew in order to assist him in his studies.

George Matheson's life was marred by two extremely painful, personal disappointments. Early in life he fell in love with a young woman whom he asked to be his wife. She consented but then, just weeks later when Matheson's doctor informed him that his failing eyesight would soon be totally gone... his fiancée broke their engagement telling him that she just couldn't envision the thought of spending the rest of her life, married to a blind man!

It was a deeply crushing, painful blow to Matheson... a sad chapter in his life that unfortunately, would be repeated again just a few years later.

Matheson never married, so when he became the popular pastor of the 2,000 member St. Bernard's Parish in Argyleshire, his sister became the hostess of his parish.

But then one day, his sister informed him that that she had fallen in love and was planning to be married! and suddenly Matheson realized that soon he would be alone again... just as he had been years earlier when his fiancée walked out of his life!

On the day of his sister's wedding which he did not attend... a deeply broken Matheson sat down and in less than five minutes he wrote the moving, inspiring hymn, "O Love that Will Not Let me Go."

But... in the hour of his deepest despair and bitterness, God inspired Matheson to recall the memory of the beautiful rainbows he had seen and loved in the days before he lost his sight... and suddenly his sorrow and bitterness disappeared, and were replaced by a renewal of hope!

Listen again to the powerful witness of a blind man's profound heartbreak, and sadness... as they are suddenly transformed by the realization that God had not deserted him.

O Lord that will not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee;
I give thee back the life I owe,
That in thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.

O light that followest all my way,
I yield my flickering torch to thee;
My heart restores its borrowed ray,
That in thy sunshine's blaze its day
May brighter... fairer be.

O joy that seekest me through pain,
I cannot close my heart to thee;
I trace the rainbow through the rain,
And feel the promise is not vain,
That morn shall tearless be.

O Cross that liftest up my head,
I dare not ask to fly from thee;
I lay in dust life's glory dead,
And from the ground there blossoms red
Life that shall endless be!

Amazing, powerful stuff!

* * *

Friends, whenever you feel absolutely weighed down by the weight of the world... remember George Matheson's inspiring faith revealed in this hymn and realize that by the Grace of God, painful disappointments can be transformed into triumphs and terrible crisis can become blessings!

So, in future days, be sure to thank Randy for the thoughtfulness of his morning messages and also take time to speak to Georgiann Toole, Barbara King and to the members of our choirs thanking them for lovingly-sharing their devotion and musical talent with us, as we worship!

And finally... the next time you stand to sing a hymn of praise to Almighty God sing out with gusto, as if you really mean it!

Sing praise to God who reigns above.
The God of all creation.
The God of power, the God of love,
The God of our salvation.
With healing balm my soul he fills,
And every faithless murmur stills!
To God all praise and glory!
Amen!