

SOUL FOOD: *The Psalms*
“The God of Music”

A sermon by Dr. J. Matthew Burton, Jr.
Central United Methodist Church
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(Psa 150 NRSV) Praise the LORD! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty firmament! {2} Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his surpassing greatness! {3} Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp! {4} Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe! {5} Praise him with clanging cymbals; praise him with loud clashing cymbals! {6} Let everything that breathes praise the LORD! Praise the LORD!

CAN YOU IMAGINE?

CONTEMPORARY ONLY

CLIP: “Dan in Real Life – A Love Song”

The 19th century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche was correct when he said, ***“Life without music would be a mistake.”*** Can you imagine a life without music? No songs, no tunes, no rock, no roll, no jazz, no hymns, no boogie-woogie, no country-music, no symphonies, no choir, no handbells, no praise team, no singing in the shower, no whistling?

- Couples would have no songs to romance to. There would be no such thing as “our song.”
- Sinatra couldn’t fly to the moon.
- Elvis couldn’t complain about people stepping on his blue suede shoes.
- Tony Bennett would have to write a letter about how he left his heart in San Francisco.
- Ray Charles would look rather strange up on stage without a piano telling us that Georgia is on his mind.
- What would bride march down to at weddings, the reading of a poem or silence? Maybe applause would have to do? At the end of the wedding what would the happy couple march out to; would

they walk out to the barking of dogs or maybe the congregation would just start talking?

- What would they do at the reception? Can you imagine doing YMCA and the Macarena without music?
- What about when the baby arrives, are you going to lull her to sleep with a reading from Shakespeare? Maybe you could use random readings from the dictionary or Good Housekeeping. Could we just bore them to sleep with words?
- There would be no music programs in our schools. My wife, Beverly, would have to find some other form of income.
- There would be no bands, school choirs or orchestras. There would be no school fight song and cheerleaders would have to dance and cheer minus the music.
- When Ivah Davis celebrated her 100th birthday, we would have recited in monotone *“happy birthday to you.”*
- When duty calls, what would the soldiers march to?
- There would be no bands or music in Monroe’s Christmas parade and John Philip Sousa would have to get a day job.
- There would be no patriotic songs on the 4th of July.
- And can you image the radio with no music—nothing but Blah, blah, blah.
- There would be no Jim O’Dell at Central, no Choir, handbells, Central Brass, Praise Team, Youth Praise Team, Trinity or Joy’s Boys. **I don’t know about you but I’m getting depressed. Let’s sing a song!**¹

Hymn: “O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing” v.1
Praise Song: “Shout to the North”

Now, that feels better! I don’t know about you, but I can’t imagine a world without music. Someone has advanced the idea that man singing came before speech—human language is really singing without the

¹Adapted from, “*What In the World Would We Do Without Music?*” www.playpiano.com. Accessed 11/16/2009.

music. I do know that music is universal. Music is a language that the whole world speaks and understands because music speaks to the depths of our soul. It moves and inspires. It can bring a smile as quickly as a tear. It can pierce the deadly silence and push back the sound and horror of war.

There was an awesome image carried in *The New York Time Magazine*, July 1992. It pictured a middle-aged man with long hair and a great bushy mustache. He was dressed in formal evening clothes. He was sitting in a café chair in the middle of a bombed-out street.

In the background, you could see the front of a bakery where mortar fire struck a breadline in Late May of that year, killing twenty-two people. The man was playing his cello. He was a member of the Sarajevo Opera Orchestra. There was little he could do about hate and war; it had been going on in Sarajevo for many centuries. For twenty-two days he pulled up a chair and cello at the very time those people had been killed, 4:00 PM and played his cello. Serbian Bombs crashed around from time to time. Over and over again he played the same piece of music, Albinoni's Adagio in G minor.

This particular piece of music was constructed from a manuscript fragment found in the ruins of Dresden after the Second World War. The music survived the firebombing. Perhaps he chose to play Albinoni's piece of music because he knew the story from Dresden. He honored those who died waiting in a breadline. Many thought he was foolish. Yet, it is hard to forget the man with his cello. His twenty-two day protest was a testament of how something beautiful—music—can triumph over horror.²

THE GIFT OF MUSIC

²Robert Fulghum, *Maybe (Maybe Not: Second Thoughts from a Secret Life)* (New York, NY: Random House).

Music is a gift. I can even say that I might not be in ministry if it had not been for music. I was a church music major in undergraduate school. Most of what I learned about music I learned in church and at our United Methodist Greensboro College. I sang in church growing up, in college and I've been singing every since. I have strong opinions about music. I think music can either make or break a worship service. I also believe that whatever kind of music it is that it ought to be done to the best of one's ability. Music takes dedication and practice which is the way we should treat any gift whether it be athletics, art, oratory, writing or music. We never know when the music might change a person's life.

THE GIFT OF MUSIC IN LIFE

Ann Lamott writes in her book, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*, that after years of drug addiction, suicide attempts, and depression how she first heard the sounds of Gospel music. It came from a little church across the street from where she was living. The building was not much to look at she says, it was just a ramshackle building with a tiny cross on top. But, she said, the music forced her to stop and listen.

When she listened, she heard words of gospel songs she remembered from her childhood. Week after week, she stood just outside the front door of the tiny church listening to the music. After many weeks she got up the courage to move into the doorway of the church and listen to the songs.

There was a choir of five black women and one white man. They were, according to Lamotte, making glorious music. She begin to go back to the little church once a month, always slipping out before the sermon. She began to love many things about the church, their care for one another, their community mission program, the way they welcomed strangers. But she writes, ***“It was the singing that pulled me in and split me wide open. That music,”*** she said, ***“was breath and food. Something inside me that was stiff and rotting would feel soft and tender. Somehow the singing wore down all the boundaries and distinctions that kept me so isolated. Sitting there, standing with them***

to sing, sometimes so shaky and sick that I felt like I might tip over, I felt bigger than myself, like I was being taken care of, tricked into coming back to life.³

An old Indian proverb speaks to the power of music:

*Love is revealed in words.
When words are not enough,
It is revealed in deeds.
When deeds are not enough,
Love resorts to music.
Creation is the music of God.⁴*

THE GIFT OF MUSIC IN WORSHIP

According to the Psalmist, there are no restrictions on the kinds of instruments to be used to worship. My father still tells the story about the time he invited a couple of young men to share a song in worship using a guitar as their backup instrument. Not only were members of the congregation rude to the performers but they almost ran my dad out of town. I think God probably frowned that day.

God smiles when he hears musicians using their talent to praise him. It doesn't matter whether it is a guitar, drums, lute or harp. All instruments used in worship to enhance our praise are pleasing to God.

As we know the founders of the Methodist movement, John Wesley and George Whitefield went into the hillsides of eighteenth-century England with an evangelical zeal and a life-changing message. They took their sermons out of the pulpits and preached them in the coalmines and fields. The result was thousands upon thousands of lives were changed as they came to faith in Jesus Christ.

³Ann Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (New York, NY: Anchor Books, 2000), 46-48.

⁴Source Unknown.

A lesser-known fact is that Charles Wesley, John brother, went with them. Often he would sit outside the taverns listening to the beer drinking songs. Charles, in a stroke of genius, took the bar tunes and wrote religious lyrics to accompany them.

I can imagine people staggering down the street after a few pints and suddenly hearing a familiar tune. They would open the door expecting a party but instead it would be a revival where the preacher called them to get down on their knees.

Some of those characters became the spiritual foreparents of Methodism. It all happened through the power of the faith being sung! Music is the universal language. It can heal souls and mend broken relationships. It can bring us closer to God.

THE GIFT OF MUSIC IN PRAISE

When John Wesley was on his deathbed he had only one request, ***“Children, as soon as I am released, sing a Psalm of praise to God.”*** Everywhere we go, in everything we do, whatever state we are in, we should always sing a song of praise to the One who made us, the One who sustains us, the One who will see us through.

It is appropriate that we end our series on the Psalms with the 150th. It is the fifth in a group of Hallelujah psalms. It is in fact, ***“Hallelujah”*** turned into an entire psalm. It is the final call to praise God no matter where you are or what is happening in your life.

Bishop Hans Lijle Tells of an August Saturday in 1944 when the doorbell of his study rang interrupting his work on the sermon he was to preach the next morning in St. John’s Church, Berlin. He opened the door and found two Gestapo officers standing there. They arrested him, and few hours later he found himself thrown into a prison cell. He tells how the panic of fear and loneliness almost overwhelmed him as the cell door slammed behind him. He said he flung himself on his knees and began to pray to God for help. Then he became aware that someone was

whistling a familiar melody. He sprang to the small window in the cell door, listened closely and whistled back: ***“O for a thousand tongues to sing, my great Redeemer’s praise.”*** He was not alone! His spirit was restored. He knew he would always have something to sing about, no matter how dark the night or how uncertain the future.

May it always be the same for us. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.