

“I Sing for Joy”

Psalm 92

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I am glad the Book of Psalms is included in the Bible. This ancient collection of 150 psalms and hymns and anthems and spiritual songs is a rich compendium of expressions of faith. Its inclusion in the canon is a strong affirmation of how God’s truth is revealed in music as well as in story and parable and prophecy. In the Book of Psalms, we see that profound encounters with the holy are captured in poetry and set to music, and have been handed down to enrich the worship and the spiritual life of all generations. Of course, the composing of hymns and anthems and spiritual songs continues to this day, but the Book of Psalms serves as the bedrock for all that has come along since.

In some of the psalms, the poet has been close to death, terminally ill, and has written verses to describe those feelings of abandonment, and wonders where God could possibly be? For example, the lament of Psalm 22: **“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?”** For many of us, these words name precisely how we have felt with our cancers and our griefs.

In some of the psalms, the poet has been delivered from some enemy, some heckler, someone who has belittled him. These are the psalms of thanksgiving. For example, the gratitude of Psalm 66: **“How awesome are your deeds! Because of your great power, your enemies cringe before you.”** For many of us, these words capture our sentiments altogether. We were put down, but God has raised us up.

In Psalm 92, the psalm for our worship today, the poet is just having one of those days when the joy within him can not be contained. The joy bubbles up from some deep reservoir and will not be silenced. The joy finds expression in music. In the movie, Ordinary People, the boy, Conrad, is singing in the school choir. They have been rehearsing for a concert. He has been making eyes at a girl in the soprano section. After the rehearsal, they talk. She agrees that he can call her sometime on the phone. For a few moments, as he walks across the lawn of the school, all of the weighty concerns of his life are lifted off his shoulders, and Jared sings out loud a few alleluias. The joy in his heart simply has no other place to go! It spills out of his body in music. He sings for joy! Though I have now watched this film over 100 times, when this scene comes up on the screen, I weep tears of joy; for Conrad's song touches my soul.

And this is why all 150 psalms made it into the Bible. At one time or another, these anthems touch our souls. They heal us; they inspire us; they move us; they teach us; they meet us where we are, and they reveal to us the very presence of God.

This is why sacred music plays such an important role in our tradition of congregational worship. This is why we sing hymns and why we have two choirs to sing anthems and why we have a second Sunday music program and why we bring in flutes and trumpets and drums and trombones and oboes and cellos and violins and guitars and organs and pianos. In the same way that story and parable and prophecy reveal the sacred, so is music a language that carries the word of God into our minds and into our hearts and then dwells in our memory.

Sacred music also teaches us our faith. This is why so much care goes into the selection of worship music. Because the lyrics and the tunes are so instructive and because they tend to linger long after the sermon has been forgotten, great care is taken in the selection of what we sing and what we play.

Pam Perry's organ prelude this morning is an arrangement of the old Shaker tune, "Simple Gifts." Aaron Copland wove this melody into his Appalachian Suite, but we've been singing this lovely tune in church since the mid 19th Century. When I hear this tune, the words flood into my consciousness. I can not keep them out. And I know I am being taught a sustaining theology. I know I am learning one of the secrets of our faith. And I am so grateful to the poet and to the composer. This hymn can only be sung from that place of great joy.

'Tis the gift to be simple
'tis the gift to be free
'tis the gift to come down where we ought to be
and when we find ourselves in the place just right
'twill be in the valley of love and delight.
When true simplicity is gained
to bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed
to turn, turn will be our delight
'Till by turning, turning we come round right.

Whoever wrote this hymn had an encounter with a liberating God. The Shaker who composed this spiritual song knew something of the joy that comes when all of life's clutter is swept to one side such that God's redeeming love is unmistakably real. All pretensions melt away. And there is no shame in being the person God created us to be. 'Tis the gift to be simple; 'tis the gift to be free."

Our sacred music teaches us our theology. Our opening hymn this morning, My Life Flows on in Endless Song, is based upon Psalm 46. This composer invites us to sing of a risen Savior who is present when the storms of life threaten the foundations of our lives. This hymn is really a prayer for those who have been imprisoned for freedom's sake. The third verse, added during the McCarthy era of terror in the 1950's, prays for those sent to jail because of speaking their truth and not compromising what it meant to be truly free. This composer knew what Jesus meant when he proclaimed, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me to bring release to the captives, to set the prisoners free." When we sing this hymn, we are claiming a faith in a living Christ, a Christ who sets us free from whatever holds us back from loving with all of our heart and all of our mind and all of our strength.

“When tyrants tremble, sick with fear,
and hear their death knells ringing;
When friends rejoice both far and near,
How can I keep from singing?
In prison cell and dungeon vile
Our thoughts to them are winging;
When friends by shame are undefiled,
How can I keep from singing?”

Whoever wrote that hymn knows that to sing is to pray. Whoever wrote that hymn knows that Christ is a Light in this world. Whoever wrote this hymn is our teacher of theology. How can I keep from singing? This hymn can only be sung from that place of great joy!

Our sacred songs teach us our beliefs. We therefore choose them with the greatest of care. After awhile, we will sing our closing hymn, “In the Midst of New Dimensions.” Though it is based on our most ancient Hebrew texts, Genesis, Exodus and Numbers, it sings of a God who is still speaking!

It sings of a God who is radically inclusive and who calls the church to be a reflection of that radical inclusion. It sings of a God who sees each person as a gift, each person as a love song.

When we watch the Olympic Games, it's the gymnastics who thrill me the most. I love the floor exercise and the balance beam and the parallel bars and the horse thing and the one where they run and spring off a board and spin around in mid air. I watch my TV screen and I hope each gymnast will STICK their landing! I love being able to say, "She STUCK it!" A ten! Perfect! Nailed it! YES! That is how I feel about this last hymn for today, In the Midst of New Dimensions. Julian Rush, the composer, nails it! He nails our Christian theology! He sticks it! Soon, we'll be singing from that place of deep joy:

We are man and we are woman,
all persuasions, old and young,
each a gift in your creation,
each a love long to be sung.

Some things will be different after today because our organist and choir director is retiring. No one can wear her shoes. Someone else will come along wearing his or her own pair of shoes. And, of course, some things will change; some things will be different. But not everything will change. God will still seek us out. God will still encounter us. God will still transform our souls. And we will find that the joy we know will keep bubbling up from the deep places of our being and will erupt in hymns and in psalms and in anthems and in spiritual songs. It can not be otherwise, for our God is still speaking and we are still being renewed day by day. Today, I sing for joy, and tomorrow, I will sing for joy again. In the greatest of hope, I say 'Amen'!

