

When Words Are Not Enough
Psalm 8
Northminster Presbyterian Church
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Have you ever had one of those moments — listening to music, or perhaps singing it — when, as the song rises to a climactic moment, the hairs on the back of your neck stand up? Or you get a sense of your heart beating a little faster? For some people, it comes in the national anthem on the “o’er the land of the free” line. Or, for some, it’s at the beginning of the “When we’ve been there 10,000 years” line of “Amazing Grace” starts.

There is one that always gets me, and it’s not in a hymn — not a church hymn anyway. It’s the closing song of Act 1 of “Les Miserables.” Many of you know it, I am sure. The title is “One Day More.” It’s long. It begins with each of the lead characters singing a line about what has happened or what is about to happen as the French students prepare to set up the barricades. Each of them sings their own theme, and then they start layering them on top of one another until it’s a cacophony of sound.

But suddenly, the following line comes: “Tomorrow is the judgment day. Tomorrow we’ll discover what our God in heaven has in store.” And, thrillingly, what was nine different themes is now one chorus united. And they continue: “One more dawn, one more day, one day more...” That moment, when they move to unison and then break into harmonies that build and build until everyone is singing full voice, it almost dares an audience not to respond. The big flag, waving behind the singers, might as well be a flag waiving surrender to raw, breathtaking emotion.

Now imagine that same scene when each character comes on stage repeating a spoken line that they said earlier. And they start to layer their speaking on top of one another and then they start shouting that same line. Not the same effect at all, right? Speaking is NOT the same thing as singing.

I sometimes think that is one of the greatest challenges of any examination of the Psalms. And that’s what we’ll be doing for all of July, looking at Psalms. One of the greatest challenges is that we see them on the page as written poems in English where someone has tried to be a little poetic in making translation choices but where the original Hebrew context and musical character of the lines is completely lost. Think about it this way:

*(SUNG) Frere Jacques, frere Jacques,
Dormez-vous? Dormez-vous?
Sonnez les matines! Sonnez les matines!
Ding, dang, dong. Ding, dang, dong.*

*(SPOKEN) Brother John, Brother John,
Are you sleeping? Are you sleeping?
Ring the morning alarm. Ring the morning alarm.
ding, dong, ding, ding, dong, ding.*

It's not the same, right? So when we approach today's hymn, for that is what it is, let's look at the words and try to imagine what the music might sound like — How majestic is your name in all the earth? When I look at all you have done, God, it completely overwhelms me.

All this week when I would look at this hymn, all I kept thinking was — the person who wrote this was having one of those mountaintop experiences. You know, something life-changing has happened; something almost unimaginatively good.

A number of us on the ASP trip this summer had experiences like that, a moment of grace, a moment of joy, a moment of your breath being taken away by the beauty of a valley or reservoir appearing around a bend or at the top of climbing a road.

From the text, it's as though the writer is actually on a mountaintop, looking down over all of the earth and looking up at the heavens, like the picture Amy Williams took last week that's on the cover of the bulletin. It's as though the poet is looking down and it's all too big and wonderful to be imagined.

It's overwhelming. We humans have been placed in the middle of this. We've been made to be the creatures God has chosen to have the greatest ability to understand and be responsible for all of this. We alone have the ability, so far as we know, on this planet, to appreciate the vastness of the universe and the minuscule miracle of the atom. We alone have been given the knowledge and understanding and curiosity to create beauty and art as gifts of the imagination. And we alone can intentionally destroy it, understanding the consequences of our actions.

And this is not something the Psalmist can write a story about; it is something that must be sung. Only music and that "raise the hair on the back of your neck" kind of presentation does the feelings and emotions justice.

There are times when words are not enough; when saying something simply doesn't convey enough emotion or the depth of feeling — the sense of joy, or fear, or love, or pain, or happiness, or deepest sadness.

Singing songs, this is the medium of metaphor and emotion. When the riverboat worker sings "Old man river...he don't say nothin'....he just keeps rollin' along..." we know that Jim is not singing about the river at all but that his life as a former slave on a 19th century riverboat is horribly unfair and unjust. But no one seems to notice his pain; no one seems to notice his sadness. Even the river doesn't say anything, it just keeps flowing downstream; it doesn't care.

That song would never have worked as a speech. It would never have communicated anything close to the same thing. And this is why we sing. It's why we sing in real life. It's why we sing and love to listen to others sing in church and in all areas of our lives, because poetic words coupled with rhyme and meter and pitch and melody and tempo create something, something that, in the right moment, can have a hint of God in it. There is a reason the Angels sing when Jesus is born; there is a reason Miriam sings when the people are delivered from Egypt and Pharaoh's forces are prevented from catching them. Sometimes words just won't get us there.

Joseph Caulkins knows all about this. He is a choral teacher in Sarasota Florida. He directs a number of choruses. If you ask him, he will tell you which one has the most mountaintop experiences for him. It's not his award winning college chorus or the almost-famous church choir he conducts at a local Baptist megachurch there in Sarasota. It's one that meets in the local hospital. They call it the "Off-Key" Chorale, and it has a unique reason for coming together every Tuesday. Its members consist of Parkinson's disease patients and their caregivers.

It's a project of the Neuro Challenge Foundation, one of the key foundations working with Parkinson's patients. As a reminder, Parkinson's is a chronic, progressive neurological disease often marked by tremors or trembling, and as the disease progresses, patients typically lose volume and clarity in their speaking voices. But Joseph Caulkins says that singing is a way to combat the progress of the disease. A big part of rehearsals every week is to work on breathing and relaxing techniques that have transformed the lives of many Parkinson's patients. People who can hardly speak can sing and be heard much more loudly than they can speak.

Caulkins says that despite the great choral works and incredible artistry of his other choirs, he has more mountaintop moments with these 40 honestly mediocre singers than any of his other choirs. And it's because he knows the effort that goes into any note that is held for more than just a moment. He knows when they can sing quietly and then loudly, people who had almost no breath when they came to him, now have amazing breath control. And yes, the disease will eventually take their voices, but not yet; not until they have sung the songs they have left to sing. He recalls one of the most emotional moments for him was in their first week:

The moment was not a big high note or a crescendo when this little choir in a hospital staff room — half of them having to concentrate extra hard just to breathe and sustain notes — were able to sing the sweet little song "Edelweiss" from *The Sound of Music*. "Small and white, clean and bright...blossom of snow how you bloom and grow, bloom and grow forever...." He says he looked around and it wasn't just the sound that raised the hackles on the back of his neck. If you know anyone with Parkinson's, you know that frequently, it affects the muscles of the face, and most patients end up with what they call "the mask," where faces become flat and unexpressive, always looking just a bit sad.

And that's how most of the folks looked when they came in that day. But as they sang this simple beautiful song of hope, when he looked around, he did not see masks with no emotion. All he could see was the joy on their faces, the smiles and radiance and passion he called a "mountaintop experience achieved through dedication, courage, and love of life."

The writer of today's Psalm is having one of those experiences and in the midst of it feels the presence of God. It takes his breath away.

When did this happen to you? At the birth of a child? Or at the thrilling climax of a sporting event? Or in the release of tension when a loved one came through surgery okay? Or maybe you remember the flip side, those moments of pain and loss so great that only a song can convey the message or the feeling? I remember on my 25th birthday I was sitting in a church in Springfield, Massachusetts at the funeral of my cousin Karen, the oldest of the 11 cousins on my father's side of the family. She had died suddenly during surgery to remove a tumor behind one ear.

Somehow I had held it together until the choir from her church began to sing. It was a selection from John Rutter's "Requiem." And a few notes in that piece that I had sung so many times before, that Karen and I had talked about singing before, grabbed hold of me and would not let me go. And a few minutes of really ugly crying later, there was a different place in my heart, broken open, but then also filled by music.

I think that's what the writer of our sermon hymn must have meant in the words we will sing in a few minutes:

My life flows on in endless song;
Above earth's lamentation,
I hear the sweet, tho' far-off hymn
That hails a new creation;
Thro' all the tumult and the strife
I hear the music ringing;
It finds an echo in my soul—
How can I keep from singing?

Robert Wadsorth Lowry wrote the music that we know so well but no one knows who the Pauline T was who was credited with the poem in the *New York Observer* newspaper 149 years ago this summer. But it sings to that very deep well within us that in moments of greatest joy and moments of greatest need it is music that breaks us open. Scientists tell us that our brains actually hunger for these moments because, whether in the saddest most emotional part of a song or the stirring climax like that moment in "Les Miserables," our brains release Dopamine in almost equal amounts, dopamine which literally opens our hearts and causes blood to flow more steadily, stabilizes our blood pressure, and fills our brain with comfort and positive feelings — even when we are deeply sad. We are hard-wired for songs to feed our bodies and our souls.

Every day, driving the 30 minutes from the house we were repairing to the school where we were sleeping, our team would listen and sing along to John Denver's "Country Roads." "Country roads, take me home to the place I belong..." And as the week wore on, the meaning changed, as the house and family we were driving from became the place we were experiencing as home, as a place where we belong — and as we became more aware that the places we called home might struggle to welcome them as they had welcomed us.

"How majestic is your name in all the earth, O God...that you have made us..." — to be inspired, to be fed, to feed one another with something as simple as words and music combined with inspiration. How wondrously made are we that we can find a place to share these deepest and highest and lowest moments with one another in song. Indeed, that being the case, how can we keep from singing?