

Let Us Sing
Psalm 95
Northminster Presbyterian Church
July 30, 2017
Rev. Michael D. Kirby

On Wednesday, May 22, 2013, a new song hit number one on the iTunes downloads chart. It was the artist's first record to make it on the charts. It was the first song he had ever professionally recorded actually. And, as it turns out, it was his last. The song, "Clouds," written and sung by teenager Zach Sobieck, had a light and ingratiating hook and lyrics that were a little opaque, but so sing-able. And they made a lot more sense when you knew the story behind them.

The song went something like this:

"I fell down, down, down
Into this dark and lonely hole.
There was no one there to care about me anymore.
And I needed a way to climb and grab a hold of the edge.
You were sitting there holding a rope,
And we'll go up, up, up.
But I'll fly a little higher.
Go up in the clouds because the view is a little nicer
Up here, my dear.
It won't be long now, it won't be long now."

Zach wrote and recorded the song three years after he was diagnosed with osteosarcoma, a form of bone cancer that attacks children and young people. He wrote it after he knew he was going to die.

It turns out the song was an effort to imagine being with the people he loved once he was no longer here — "And we'll go up, up, up. But I'll fly a little higher." Zach imagined a time and place when he and his mother, and he and his girlfriend could still be together. Only he would be a little higher. The song hit number one the day after it became true.

Zach did what we do so often when faced with that we can only imagine. He sang about it. The song is confident, a little haunting, but mostly loving, catchy and hopeful. And, to date, sales of that song and the response of its fans have generated over 1.4 million dollars for osteosarcoma research — yet another joyful legacy for this young man who died at 18.

When we sing in church, when those of us who plan worship get it right, and when the hymn, through words or melody or both, takes us to a place of wonder — a place where we can express our hopes, our fears, our confidence, our dependence, our love, all in the context of this odd thing we call a relationship with God — something wonderful can happen. That's what the Psalmists were trying to do, to sing of something that it would be hard to speak about, something where speech just wouldn't get us there.

Rabbi Abraham Heschel said, "[M]usic is an attempt to convey that which is within our reach but beyond our grasp." (Man's Quest for God: Studies in Prayer and Symbolism, 1954)

Emily Saliers is half of the Indigo Girls duo. Her father, the Rev. Dr. Don Saliers, is a professor of preaching and theology at Candler Seminary in Atlanta. They frequently write together about music and worship. They jointly wrote a few years ago, “[M]usic deepens and makes more vivid the beauty, the delight, and yes, even the lamentable terrors and sufferings of our world. Music is rooted in the human body and the human soul, and it gives voice to the spirit of human communities. Without songs to sing, life would be diminished.” I will go even further — without song, worship is diminished.

The artist who drew our cover art would agree. It’s his or her view of church without music — everyone dozing and a little bit bored. I can’t say I disagree.

Today we encounter the Psalmist constructing a song for worship. It’s what those who study the Psalms call an enthronement psalm, but this is not an inauguration song celebrating a new king for Israel or Judah. No, it’s a song for the enthronement of God as the sovereign over all of the chosen people.

The Hebrews had their share of terrible national leaders. This king was corrupt; that king thought he was above the law; this king was more concerned with gold than the people; that king made a show of faith, but was really just playing power games by using religious leaders as his toadies. Out of all of those deeply disappointing kings, it appears a new ritual arose in the temple — crowning God as King — to remind the people that the one who was really in charge — who held their futures, who was the source of life and the earth and all that was good — was God, not Saul or David or Solomon or any of the long string of mostly losers who were in charge.

And so they sang a song about the world as it really was, not as it appeared to be. They sang a song about this mysterious God who was so unknowable that they couldn’t even use the divine name; this God who made everything — even us — was a God who sought good for us. They sang about this God who was greater than the so-called gods of the cultures all around them — who died every season or slept every winter or only acted for the good of the people when bribed with offerings. But not our God. Our God is like a shepherd who never abandons the sheep — us — and seeks out the lost and the threatened.

And because we are in the midst of the metaphor and artistic imagination of a song, the Psalmist even imagines God singing a verse, a verse to remind them of a time in the wilderness when the people were at Meribah. The Meribah story is one that is remembered in many places in the Bible. The people — who God is feeding, who have escaped slavery and oppression, who have been given signs and wonders of God’s power — are complaining because they are thirsty. So God tells Moses to command the rock to yield water. But Moses takes his staff and strikes the rock in what appears to be a power play (Numbers 20:8-11). The result is that the people are given water but they wander for years before settling down again because their faithlessness kept them from finding comfort and rest in the Promised Land for decades. And Moses does not enter the Promised Land at all.

Why such a weird hymn? Remember the many not-so-great national leaders and frustrating head priests in the temple? They needed to recall to memory that God never promised perfect leadership; God promised not to ever leave them. And God didn’t let them starve but did let the people wander for decades when they tried to rely on themselves or took God for granted.

For four weeks already we have been reading and singing the oldest songs of faith together with Christians and Jews across the centuries, lifting our voices together in praise and lament,

in joy and hope. So perhaps we, who so obviously appreciate music in worship, don't need today's sermon. Still, perhaps we — who would be filled with Spirit; we who would make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation — should remember that singing is not just to experience the spirit lifting us, but to remember that this life is not all about us but about something greater. And that is worth singing about. Indeed, perhaps only through singing can we come close to expressing it most effectively.

Songs that help us rehearse and remember that we are part of something greater, something dependable, can transform the world. Just ask the people of Estonia who began singing in the streets in banned music festivals in 1986 and who by 1991 had turned a song of memory from 1947, 'Mu Isamaa on Minu Arm', or 'Land of My Fathers, Land that I Love' into the theme of a revolution — the singing revolution historians now call it — that ended Soviet rule in Estonia.

The late, great Oliver Sacks, physician, philosopher and brilliant writer, played by Robin Williams in the movie *Awakenings*, wrote extensively about music and memory, and the power of songs centered in memory to change us. He wrote, "We find ourselves calmed by it, excited by it, comforted by it, mystified by it and often haunted by it. It can lift us out of depression or move us to tears." His theories were put to the test later in his life when he suffered a damaged leg after a mountain climbing accident. He literally couldn't remember how to walk and had no real desire to until a particular piece of music was played for him. And in his own words, "I recovered the lost rhythm of walking like remembering a once-familiar but long-forgotten tune." I think that sometimes it is the music of faith that reminds us of who we are. In those times where we have lost the rhythm of our lives in Christ, it is through music that we recover it. As he later put it in his final book on music and the brain:

"Every culture has songs and rhymes to help children learn the alphabet, numbers, and other lists. Even as adults, we are limited in our ability to memorize series or to hold them in mind unless we use mnemonic devices or patterns — and the most powerful of these devices are rhyme, meter, and song. (Oliver Sacks, *Musicophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain* [Alfred A. Knopf, 2007], 158)

The Director for Worship says this about music, "Song is a response which engages the whole self in prayer." St. Augustine, almost 1600 years ago, said that "whoever sings [to God in worship] prays twice." And, it is precisely because music is both imagined memory of what can be and prayer, that it seems to cause so much turmoil. John Calvin was obsessed with music having too corrupting an influence on the church, banning instruments and any song that wasn't the psalms. He would be just as offended by our piano as by the use of guitars or drums in worship. Why the fear? Perhaps it is precisely because music is so powerful an emotional and inspirational experience. The concern is that, unless the musicians are keenly directed toward praising God, toward prayer, the medium could override the message.

So what does that mean for us who would worship faithfully? We who would sing to the Lord? Make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation? Who would come into God's presence with thanksgiving? And who would make a joyful noise to God with songs of praise? It means that the words and music — the memory and the emotional experience of our music in worship — are important. They are not a place holder; they are perhaps the most heart-touching, faithful prayers that are uttered in worship. That's why we sometimes ditch hymns whose words become an impediment — "Onward Christian Soldiers," for example. It's why our hymnal has music from other cultures in it — Spanish music and Japanese and Korean and African. It reminds us that God's music is sung and performed around the world; it helps make us one

with the Nigerians who this morning also sang “Halle Halle Halle” like we did just two weeks ago.

And so we pray twice every time we sing in worship and we are witnesses to prayer when we hear music in this time. Matthew reminds us that on the night of the Last Supper, Jesus and the disciples sang a hymn before going out to the Mount of Olives. Luke tells us that Paul and Silas, imprisoned in a Roman jail, passed the night by singing hymns to and with their fellow prisoners. Hymns have the power to inspire the work we have to do, the lives we have to lead, and the challenges we have to face.

Some of you have heard that it is music that actually is directly responsible for me being here, being Presbyterian, and becoming a pastor. I was a young attorney church shopping and I was not finding what I needed. Then, a friend at work asked me if I could be a substitute singer in her church’s choir one summer. Three Sundays later I realized my theology was actually reformed and the rest as they say....

Through it all, I came to have a favorite piece to sing, the Lutkin Benediction, a very simple setting of that old text — one of the songs that escaped the Psalter. It’s from Numbers chapter six: “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and give you peace, the Lord be gracious unto you....” The choir I was in during college and law school sang it my last Sunday in that Baptist church choir in Waco. We sang it my first Sunday as a Presbyterian. And it was the last thing the St. Philip choir sang at my ordination service....and it was the first thing this choir sang after I was officially installed as pastor here. Lutkin once said that he became a writer of church music because the Psalms had given him so much peace, and hope and joy. It was the Psalms, the earliest music of the church that brought him in. And it was the music that brought me in, sent me out, and brought me in again.

As today’s Psalm reminds us, God is the great king, the good shepherd, the benevolent sovereign, the God above all other gods, the composer of the world, the composer of you. The Psalms and the songs of the church bear the memories of hundreds of generations of those who have experienced God’s love, experienced the peace that comes from looking to God — and not to Caesar or Trump or Rauner or Madigan or Preckwinkle or Biss — as our true sovereign, the one who can make us and the world whole. The songs of faith remind us that the prophets sang the songs that echo in our mission and ministry. They sang songs of justice, equality, compassion, empowerment and peace. Those songs remind us that Jesus Christ, the personification of God’s love for humanity, saw the world and each of us as we could be, singing familiar tunes of selflessness, of hospitality to the stranger and of unity.

And so, as we live out the faith we have been given, in all we do, in all we proclaim, in the love we share and the work we do for God and for one another, let us sing. Amen.