

“THE PSALMS ARE SONGS,” A Message Delivered on Music Sunday, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, June 20, 2021

Today is Music Sunday—not something to be taken for granted. Because of the COVID pandemic it has been a year and three months since our choir has sung together. And almost as long for our congregation to join in singing, though we started up several weeks back. This is truly a glad reunion day—for our choir and for our congregation. We are being reunited with our sacred music.

I don't involve that term *sacred music* lightly. Music has long been part of our worship of God. That fabled Old Testament servant of the Lord, David, may have made a mark slaying the giant Goliath with his slingshot. (*1 Samuel 17: 41-54*) But he was just as great, if not greater, with his stringed lyre and considerable vocal talents. By means of them David was also able to soothe the savage beast in Israel's King Saul, who may have suffered from bipolar depression. David was welcomed into King Saul's court as a musician, rising to a position of immense power and influence. (*1 Samuel 16:14-23*) Indeed, eventually he became king, not only of Israel but also Judea and Jerusalem. Before and after David ascended the throne he wrote many songs which partly survive today in the Old Testament Book of Psalms. The psalms are songs. Unfortunately, all that's preserved are their wonderful lyrics. The melodies of David and other early Israelite composers have been lost to posterity.

Following David almost a thousand years later, Jesus sang. Indeed, at the last supper in the Jerusalem upper room, he joined his apostles in singing hymns before going to meet his destiny in the Garden of Gethsemane. (*Matthew 26:30*) Singing probably helped calm them all, checking fear and anxiety. After Jesus was crucified, the apostles met in another Jerusalem room to pray. They were soon joined by 120 disciples. (*Acts 1:15-17*) Did they also sing? We don't know. But I bet they did, remembering their time with Jesus.

Significantly, the Apostle Paul who came to leadership just a little later repeatedly encourages the singing of the faithful. In his Letter to the Ephesians, Paul declares: “Be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart.” (*Ephesians 5:19*) And in his Letter to the Corinthians, Paul boldly announces: “I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the mind also.” (*1 Corinthians 14:15*) Was a more beautiful proclamation ever made?

Significantly, the author of the New Testament Book of Revelation, who might have been the Apostle John or simply another man named John, had a vision of the coming kingdom and reign of God soaring loudly with music and song. Did you hear our Call to Worship

this morning, directly taken from John's Revelation? The testimony is powerful. "I heard a voice," John says, "from heaven like the sound of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder; the voice I heard was like the sound of harpers playing on their harps, and they sing a new song before the throne... No one could learn the song except the hundred and forty-four thousand who had been redeemed from the earth." (*Revelation 14:2-3*) Sounds to me that everyone who makes it through heaven's gate is going to be joining God's celestial choir. Wearing's heaven's garb perhaps we'll all be singing as tunefully as herald angels—as good as we may sound when we're alone in morning shower!

Music and song were certainly preserved by the early church. Yet for better or worse they became the preserve of highly skilled and trained choirs, often composed of monks and nuns. After 1517, the great Protestant reformer and change agent Martin Luther democratized all that. Just as he once remarked that the best tunes shouldn't be the prize of the devil but enjoyed in church too, he opened up singing to all the people of God. He made congregational singing part of every Sunday worship. Later, Catholic Churches joined in too.

Like Israel's King David, Luther proved to be a formidable composer and lyricist. Among other works, he penned "A Mighty Fortress is Our God," which I think is one of the greatest hymns of all time. Other Protestant reformers, pastors, and teachers also turned to music and hymns to capsize the essence of our Biblical faith. Along with his brother Charles, the Methodist leader John Wesley wrote his own complement of hymns which we find in our hymnals even today.

As neurological studies now show, music heard and sung stimulates parts of the human brain that ordinary speech and reading don't necessarily stimulate and excite. Sacred messages shared through music have a way of penetrating our brain and soul that nothing else makes so wonderfully possible. Other studies have also shown that when choirs and congregations join in singing both their breathing and heartbeats begin to synchronize, creating a rewarding feeling of oneness and together that dispels any sense of loneliness and isolation. Isn't that exactly what we need in our emotional and spiritual recovery from the COVID pandemic?

Yes, music is a tremendous blessing and benefit. May we each and all rejoice in the opportunity given us to once more come together in sacred song as a sacred throng.
Amen.