

A Time for Thanksgiving Series: *For the Gift of Music*
Sermon on Psalm 100 & Ephesians 5:1-20 (11/21 & 11/22/15)
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“Shout praises to the Lord, everyone on this earth. Be joyful and sing as you come in to worship the Lord! You know the Lord is God! He created us, and we belong to him; we are his people, the sheep in his pasture. Be thankful and praise the Lord as you enter his temple. The Lord is good! His love and faithfulness will last forever.”

These words of Psalm 100 are so simple and clear: praise God with music and give thanks for God's eternal love and faithfulness.

St. Paul echoed the meaning of Psalm 100 when he offered the final two verses of our reading from Ephesians chapter 5: “When you meet together,” he wrote to the new Christians in Ephesus, “sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, as you praise the Lord with all your heart. “Always use the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to thank God the Father for everything.” //

Music is at the heart of what it means to worship God. It's not the *whole* of what it means to worship God...but music is definitely a central feature of worship – and we read about how important music is throughout the Bible. In fact, there are multiple references in Scripture about how nature itself sings or claps in praise to God.¹ Music is built-into the very fabric of Creation.

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Studies have shown the power of music even on babies in the womb...so it's not uncommon for expectant parents to be choosy about the kind of music played around their particular pregnant belly.

Just the other day, I read that researchers in Finland recently studied the musical memory of infants. One group of infants heard a particular song repeatedly while they were in their mother's womb, and another group of infants did *not* hear that song repeatedly. When comparing the two groups of infants, the researchers found that the babies who did *not* hear that song repeatedly while in utero also did not react in any notable way to the tune after they were born...but, the babies who *did* hear the song many times in utero showed signs of *recognizing* the tune for up to four months after they were born.² Isn't that incredible?

This past week, I also read some neurological and psychological studies that provided scientific evidence for many things we already know or sense about music...things like: how music brings people together – whether it's in worship, at a concert, or in simple conversation...

¹ For some of these references, check out <http://www.openbible.info/topics/nature>.

² http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/11/01/babies-can-learn-music-in-the-womb/?_r=0

about how music so often serves as a much-needed diversion when we are bored or when we need some added juice in the midst of a tedious activity...and about how music serves us so well when we want to add enthusiasm to an already joyful mood or when we want comfort in the midst of fear or sorrow³...one of the articles I read even noted in a particular study that music *can* be more effective at soothing us than prescribed anti-anxiety medication.⁴

Beyond all that, of course, most of us are aware that, if you want children to learn important, building-block sort of information, you set it to music: just try singing our English alphabet without adding the “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star” tune to the letters!

And I am most certainly grateful to Charles Raymond Offenberg, who wrote the song “Fifty, Nifty United States” because, without that song, there is no way I would know and remember all fifty United States – and in alphabetical order! Ask me to say the states without *singing* them, though, and I'm not sure I could do it...

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There's just something about the power of music. We all know this. Words have their own kind of strength...but *music* so often manages to connect with our souls at a deeper level than words alone can.

According to the philosopher Plato, “Music gives a soul to the universe, wings to the mind, flight to the imagination and life to everything.”

Church reformer and pastor Martin Luther said this about music, adding a specifically holy dimension: “Beautiful music is the art of the prophets that can calm the agitations of the soul; it is one of the most magnificent and delightful presents God has given us.”

And just the other day, I discovered a lovely quote about music by a 19th Century German poet and writer named Berthold Auerbach. He once said this: “Music washes away from the soul the dust of everyday life.”

“Music washes away from the soul the dust of everyday life.”

No matter how we think about it...no matter how simple or fancy the words we use to describe it's importance...music is *vital* to life in this world. It adds exuberance when we are already joyful, it brings calm and comfort when we are wounded, it affirms we are not alone when we are in pain, and it can bless us with hope when things fall apart.

As we complete this *A Time for Thanksgiving* sermon and worship series, it is so appropriate for us to give God specific thanks and praise for the gift of music.

³ <http://www.spring.org.uk/2011/05/the-all-time-top-six-reasons-we-love-music.php>

⁴ <http://www.cnn.com/2013/04/15/health/brain-music-research/>

Whether we call ourselves “musicians” or “music appreciators,” music is, indeed, a powerful gift from God. And it is fitting for us to say “thank you.”

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You know, it's funny...since planning this *A Time for Thanksgiving* sermon and worship series, I honestly didn't put much effort into thinking ahead about what I might say for this particular sermon – this sermon on giving thanks to God for the gift of music.

I didn't put much effort into thinking ahead about what I'd say for this sermon because I figured it would take virtually no effort to come up with all sorts of things to say about God's gift of music, what it means to *me*, and what it means to most humans.

I had ideas about what I might include...but, when I sat down this past week to actually begin putting words to the page, it was far more difficult a process than I was expecting it to be. And that shocked me.

I was a music major in college and music has been a significant part of my life and my *time* for most of my life. I *love* music. I *need* music. Most of us love and need music in order to get through life in this world. But, as much as I love and need music, the words did not come easily for this message.

As I sat, staring at my computer screen, struggling to fill the word processing screen with text, I wracked my brain trying to figure out why I was having such a hard time writing this sermon whose subject matter is so near and dear to my heart.

I wracked my brain...and then it hit me like a very heavy, very obvious, ton of bricks: I was having a difficult time writing this particular sermon because a sermon about *music* is hard to create using only spoken word.

So...most of the rest of this message is in song – one of my favorites. It's called “How Can I Keep from Singing” and, though this song was written in the mid-1800's, I first encountered it in 1999 when my college choir sang an arrangement of it. Little did I know this gorgeous song would appear in the United Methodist hymnal supplement that was published in 2000 – less than a year after my choir sang it.

We're going to sing this song, but, first, let me read you the gorgeous text Robert Lowry wrote. The four verses say this:

“My life flows on in endless song, above earth's lamentation. I hear the clear, though far-off hymn that hails a new creation ... Through all the tumult and the strife, I hear that music ringing. It finds an echo in my soul. How can I keep from singing? ... What though my joys and comforts die? I know my Savior liveth. What though the darkness gather round? Songs in the night he giveth ...

“The peace of Christ makes fresh my heart, a fountain ever springing! All things are mine since I am his! How can I keep from singing?” Then, throughout the song, this refrain repeats: “No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that Rock I’m clinging. Since love is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?”

So that's the text. Now let's add the music.

Would you please grab one of the black songbooks – *The Faith We Sing* – and turn to page 2212? “How Can I Keep from Singing” is on page 2212 and our singing of it will help serve as the close of this message. I will sing the first two verses and the refrain – with a little help from some friends – and then I will invite you to join beginning with verse 3. Again, number 2212.

[The song is sung...]

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Again, the psalmist wrote: “Shout praises to the Lord, everyone on this earth. Be joyful and sing as you come in to worship the Lord! You know the Lord is God! He created us, and we belong to him; we are his people, the sheep in his pasture. Be thankful and praise the Lord as you enter his temple. The Lord is good! His love and faithfulness will last forever.”

And, St. Paul wrote, “When you meet together, sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, as you praise the Lord with all your heart. Always use the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to thank God the Father for everything.”

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“Since love is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?”

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The good news for all of us here today is that the Lord of heaven and earth – and the Lord of our very lives – is Jesus Christ our Savior. We belong to him. And his Lordship is defined by love.

May we find comfort, joy, and hope in Christ's steadfast love for us...and may ever sing thanks and praise for that love. Let us pray:

Almighty God, you created this world and all nature sings its praise to you. The sun shines with notes of glory...the moon and stars bless the night with their own unique melodies...the wind's strong percussion reminds us of your powerful presence...and the loved ones in our lives brings us beautiful harmony. May we sing grateful praises to you in all we do. Your love truly is faithful and forever. Amen.