

“Sabbath in Song”
Psalm 150
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Introduction to series on Sabbath Summer:

For this entire summer, our sermons and worship will be gathered around the theme of Sabbath. Why Sabbath? In part because the summer is the perfect time for us to explore rest and refreshment, not just as physical requirements but as holy practices. In part we’re exploring Sabbath because our society has never been busier; rather than providing us more free time, technology has for many of us simply brought work home. Finally, we’re exploring Sabbath because it is such a rich and powerful metaphor for the ways in which we intentionally – mindfully – encounter God.

I love the way one writer expressed his understanding of Sabbath:

“Sabbath entails much more than ‘taking a break’ from daily routines. It permeates and defines daily existence because it is a way of being. The Sabbath is a disposition and a resolute desire to live a life that acknowledges our Creator and our place as creatures in a world wonderfully made. It requires a transformation in spirit that will keep the heart and mind attentive to God’s goodness and grace” (Norman Wirzba, reviewing Wendell Berry’s *A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems 1979-1987*, in *Christian Century*, November 18-26, 1998).

Today – the day we commission our choirs for their concert tour in Italy – it’s fitting that we explore Sabbath in song ... how music allows us to “acknowledge our Creator” ... how music keeps our “heart and mind attentive to God’s goodness and grace.”

Listen for the word of God as it comes to us again in the Psalter, ancient Israel’s songbook, as we read Psalm 150.

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Praise the LORD!
Praise God in his sanctuary;
praise him in his mighty firmament!
Praise him for his mighty deeds;
praise him according to his surpassing greatness!
Praise him with trumpet sound;
praise him with lute and harp!
Praise him with tambourine and dance;
praise him with strings and pipe!
Praise him with clanging cymbals;
praise him with loud clashing cymbals!
Let everything that breathes praise the LORD!

Praise the LORD!
* * * * *

“There is something about human beings that needs to make music,” writes Don Saliers, Director of the Sacred Music program at Emory University; “There is something about [us] that insists on song.” Every culture expresses itself in its own distinctive sound, much like the food of a culture, or its language is so self-revealing, which makes it that much interesting. But it’s a common trait in the human condition: making music is as universal as breathing (“Singing Our Lives,” in *Practicing Our Faith*, Dorothy Bass, editor (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), pp. 180-181).

Moreover, we lean toward music to express ourselves when words or thoughts or feelings alone are not enough. Saliers notes that

“When our language is used to move beyond the mere giving of information, we come to the threshold of song. When life is deeply felt or perceived, music gives shape and voice to the very pattern of our ... world The tensions, ... mood, convictions ... of everyday life are translated into the patterns of sound. But so also are the deepest mysteries of love and death, of loss and recovery of the sense of life. ... It is not surprising that music [is] so closely linked with the praise of [God]” (*Practicing Our Faith*, pp. 182-3).

We are meant to sing ... because our songs express our deepest selves ... because our songs link us to the very God who made us ... and because through our songs we can be touched by our Creator once again in ways we cannot even understand.

When I was reading *Leaving Church*, a memoir by Barbara Brown Taylor, I nearly fell off my chair at one point, because she described something that I thought only I experienced. I am certain now that others experience this phenomenon too. She says, “Where sermons slide off, hymns sink in.” That much is no surprise to me! But then she continues,

“Days later, I can be minding my own business, doing something as secular as sweeping the kitchen floor or balancing the checkbook, when I begin to hum a hymn tune. If I stop to identify it, I can usually recover the words, which are often so pertinent to my situation that they arrive like Priority Mail from God” ((San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2007), p. 158).

Hymns are like that, and anthems too, if you sing them or hear them often enough – and secular music too, if the words convey truth with a capital T. These songs become deep-seated messages, part of our spiritual DNA if you will, embedded in our hearts and souls, and ready to emerge at any time, to float up to the surface of our thinking in ways that we can never understand. And they are powerful.

I can't explain it much better than that – descriptions fail – but perhaps a story will help us more. I was listening to NPR one morning – it was a week or two ago, I think – and I know that some of you heard this too, because you mentioned it to me. The chaplain at Presbyterian Homes in Evanston was describing the brief worship services she offers for residents in the Alzheimers' units. These people, most of them, have suffered terrible aphasia, the inability to summon words. They are disoriented, unable to process short-term memory, unable to retrieve names of their own children, unable to know even where they are. But when they come to worship, the chaplain says, something extraordinary happens. Normally hunched over in their wheelchairs, they sit up straight, heads high. And when the hymns begin to play, they sing. And they sing every single word. From memory. And they know who they are again, both in the moment, and on the deepest level. They know who they are, and to Whom they will always belong.

When we sing, we pray twice, St. Augustine once said. He meant, of course, that we pray with our words and also with our music. But I have to wonder whether he meant more than that too: that when we sing, we pray with our mouths, but also, and most deeply, with our hearts. Amen.