

“Singing Our Faith”  
Psalm 30  
Ephesians 5:15-20  
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It is an ancient human need to make music – and in particular, to make religious music. From the dawn of time, people of faith have turned to music when words alone have failed. As early as the book of Genesis we find a nod to the antiquity of song: only a few generations after Adam comes Jubal, “the ancestor of all who play the lyre and the pipe” (Gen. 4:21). Our earliest writings of Scripture are not narratives but songs – the oldest being Miriam’s song celebrating the exodus from Egypt: “Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.” And what are the 150 psalms, if not the hymnal of ancient Israel: “I will lifteth mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help” (Ps. 121). ... “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters” (Ps. 23). The psalms remain our treasured songs of faith.

Over the centuries, the fundamental purpose of religious song hasn’t changed: music helps us give glory to God, and voice to our faith. It is those two ideas I want to explore today ... and I think that it’s important that we explore them in that order.

First, then, giving glory to God.

It seems obvious to say this, but our church – every church – exists first and foremost for the worship of God. It’s not the only thing we do – we have fellowship together and give ourselves to charitable causes, which matter very much. But *without* worship, we would be another civic club or charitable organization. Worship defines the core of who we are as a congregation.

But more than our corporate identity, worship also helps us remember our true core as human beings. Those who were raised in the Presbyterian tradition may remember from the recesses of your confirmation the first question of the Westminster Catechism: “What is the chief end of man?” If you know it, say it with me: “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.” The ultimate concern, to use Tillich’s term, the ultimate concern of all humanity is to give glory to God. And worship is the place where we do that most of all.

Ideally, then, we do not come to worship for the ceremony, for its beauty and pageantry, or for its warmth and authenticity for that matter. We do not come to worship for what we can get out of it, although we bring our longings and our hopes with us, always. No, worship is a *transitive* word. We come to worship someone else: we come to worship *God* (cf. Patrick Willson, 4/12/87, “Let Us Worship *God*,” preached at Shades Valley Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL; Willson currently pastors Williamsburg Presbyterian Church, Williamsburg, VA).

But how easy it is to lose sight of that purpose. A friend of mine, Patrick Willson, recalls the story of three sinners who died and were ushered to the throne of judgment. At one side stand three glorious angels, each wearing a sword, holding a candle in one hand and a gleaming white robe in the other. The judge opens the Book of Life and slowly turns the heavy parchment pages; when he finally looks up, trumpets sound a fanfare, and a choir of angels starts to sing their “Glorias.” Then the judge, in his *basso profundo* voice declares: “Their names are not to be found in the Book.” Again the trumpets sound, and thunder rolls down from celestial mountains. The angels extinguish their candles, and with their swords shred the white robes. The earth cracks open, releasing smells of sulfur, as the choir sings, “Woe, woe to those who go to eternal darkness.” Two of the sinners fall on their faces, gnashing their teeth. The third sinner just stands there with a rapt smile.

Finally an angel slaps the sinner with the flat of the sword, saying, “What’s wrong? Didn’t you hear the judgment?” And the sinner replies, “Yes, oh yes. It’s just – it’s just that it’s *such* a fantastic ceremony!” (Willson, 4/12/87).

As early as the 4<sup>th</sup> century, St. Augustine was so worried that worship – especially the music -- was turning into a fantastic ceremony that he was tempted to return to Athanasius’s practice of only using intonation. John Calvin, too, warned that music composed only for “the delight” of the human ear is “unbecoming to the majesty of the church and displeases God” (*The Institutes*, III.xx.32). Calvin was also battling the extraordinary passivity of Medieval worship: the priests and cathedral choirs performed spectacular music, while the congregation sat silently through the whole “show.” When Reformers like Calvin insisted on the “priesthood of all believers,” they meant in worship too. Something we take for granted -- putting hymnals in the hands of the congregation -- was revolutionary. Listen to this excerpt from a letter by a young French student in Strasbourg, written in 1545:

“They sing a Psalm of David or some prayer taken from the New Testament. This is sung by everyone, men and women together ... a wonderful thing to see. You must understand that everyone has a music book in his hand. That is how they can keep together. I never imagined that it could be as pleasant and delightful as it is!” (cited by Willson, 3/1/87, quoting Howard Hageman, *Pulpit and Table*, p. 27).

Maybe our hymn-singing isn’t perfect, but it is, nevertheless, “pleasant and delightful” to God. I’m not suggesting that there is no place for professional musicians or ensembles or choirs. Their skill not only inspires us – it offers God a gift on our behalf that we could never hope to bring on our own. But their presence is primarily to help our

hearts and voices give highest glory to God, and to help us articulate our faith.

Which leads me back to the second half of what I said was the point of our music: the fundamental purpose of religious song is *two-fold*: music helps us give glory to God, and give voice to our faith.

Now I'm aware that not everyone who comes to church considers him or herself to be a singer. And I'm also convinced that the higher the level of education and income in a congregation, the harder it is for worshipers to expose their imperfection in their singing. If it offers you any consolation, I don't have a great singing voice, and I'm stuck here at this microphone for all to hear. But singing in worship isn't meant to be an act of perfection. It's meant to be an expression of our *faith*.

There are things that make it easier. First, if you get here a wee bit before worship begins, you can look over the hymns and see if there are any stanzas that are printed below the text or even on the next page, and check if any tunes or texts are unfamiliar. We try, by the way, not to introduce more than one new-ish hymn any week, so we don't scare off tentative singers. Second, if you hold the hymnal up, you'll find you have more breath in your lungs to support the notes ... moreover, if you sing towards the front window or the cross, instead of into the page, you'll find yourself singing to the Lord instead of worrying about your neighbor. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, pay attention to the text itself: "Come thou fount of every blessing; tune my heart to sing thy praise"; "Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty! Early in the morning our song shall rise to thee."

But in the end, the text alone is not the whole of it, is it? I'm not sure why it is – I'm not a psychologist; perhaps my husband could answer this better than I can – I'm not sure why it is, but the music we sing expresses our faith in a way that words alone can't. The hymns we

love – they are so much more than merely words. Now I *love* language; I devour books the way that some inhale candy, and a well-turned phrase sends chills down my spine. But I think of *Amazing Grace*, and as much as I love the language, I cannot imagine the power of its mercy conveyed by merely reading it out loud. Could *Silent Night* extend its tenderness, or *For All the Saints* its triumph in only words? Hymns get under our skin; and ultimately I sense there’s something vulnerable about singing our faith.

One pastor and liturgy professor, Don Saliers, once asked a circle of women in a South Carolina congregation to name some of their favorite hymns. He said,

“Their replies were not surprising: ‘Amazing Grace,’ ‘How Great Thou Art’ [and others]. Then I asked how they had learned these hymns. ... For nearly two hours, these women ... spoke of their memories. They remembered the sounds of their grandfather’s or grandmother’s voice, ... the comforting feeling of leaning on their mother’s shoulder while the family sang. They remembered Sunday [worship] and summer camps .... These hymns and songs were in their bone marrow.

“It is sometimes thought that the theology of a hymn – what it teaches and expresses about our relationship to God – is contained solely in the words. Talking with these women, ... it was clear that far more than the words were at stake. Over time, ... lifting their voices to God had worked in subtle and complex ways to shape basic attitudes, affections, ways of regarding themselves, their neighbors, and God. They left me with little doubt that what they believed represented far more than intellectual agreement with the message in the words. Their music was ‘by heart,’ in the heart, and sung from the heart. Through [their] singing, the dispositions and beliefs expressed in the words of the hymns – gratitude, trust,

sadness, joy, hope – had become knit into their bodies, ... the theology by which they lived” (“Singing Our Lives, *Practicing Our Faith*, ed. Dorothy C. Bass (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), pp. 184-5).

So, my dear friends, please sing. Please sing, and your singing will shape you. Sing, and it will get under your skin.

It is an ancient human need, to make music. To come before God with awe and gratitude, to lift our voices honestly and humbly at the throne of grace. And years from now, when stirring sermons lie forgotten, and the memories of prayers stand mute, our songs – our songs will still remain. Giving glory to God. Giving voice to our faith. Amen.