

## Resounding Faith

Isaiah 58:1-9a; Colossians 3:16-17

Fourth Sunday in Lent, (March 27) 2022

Mary Cooper's 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

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Music is so much part of our lives. Every day, one way or another, whether intentional or not, we listen to music – on the radio, on our phone playlists, background music in elevators and waiting rooms, advertising jingles, and on and on. We play or perform music while singing in the shower or while driving down the highway, whistling, humming that tune that got stuck in our heads. And for some of us we play or sing every day intentionally to begin the day or toward the end of the day.

Theologian Karl Barth began each morning by listening to Mozart. Pianist and conductor Adam Schiff said that he plays Bach every day “as a kind of devotional exercise.” Cellist Pablo Casals said he began each day by going to the piano and playing two preludes and fugues of Bach ... “a kind of benediction (or blessing) on the house.” He went on, it is also “a rediscovery of the world which I have the joy of being part. It fills me with awareness of the wonder of life, with a feeling of the incredible marvel of being a human being ... Each day [the music] is something new, fantastic and unbelievable” (both quotes from Jeremy S. Begbie, *Resounding Truth*, p. 119).

When we're happy we play or sing or listen to music! And when we're sad or grieving or depressed, sometimes we do the same. We sing the blues. We cry,

we lament, we play or sing like the Psalms, as a prayer, as a way of coping, as a way of leading us out of our valley of the shadow of death, looking for hope and healing.

Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein was pulled back from the brink of suicide by listening to the slow movement of Brahms's third Quartet. And contemporary pop singer Sting said, "I think music is the one spiritual force in our lives we have access to, really. There are so many other spiritual avenues that are closed off to us, and music still has that, is still important, is important to me. It saved my life. It saved my sanity" (Begbie, p. 16).

This world is full of noise, meaningless sounds clashing in us and upon us. Babel and discord tearing at us and pulling us this way and that. In the midst of dissonance, we resonate (re-sonate) with music. Our lives become out of tune, and music becomes a way of being re-tuned.

That's part of why music is so central in the life of the church, and why it is a key ingredient in Sunday worship. Our lives are retuned in worship.

In the Bible, this is why our living must be congruent with our worship and our worship must be connected with our living. To put it differently, bad music is connected to bad living. Listening to a tacky tune leads to a tawdry life. At the same time, leading a tawdry life leads to enjoying tacky tunes.

In today's scripture, Isaiah says the same. The people have been busy at worship, honoring God with a fast. Isaiah tells Israel, don't bother. God will not

take notice of all your liturgical gyrations. The worship God wants is to “loose the bonds of injustice, ... to let the oppressed go free, ... to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house.” (Isa. 58:6-7).

Isaiah is not, as is sometimes claimed, playing off our ethics against our worship. Rather, he is connecting our work and our worship, our worship and our work. The word “liturgy” means literally “the work of the people.” Worship is the work of the people of God. Our Christian ethics is one with our Christian worship. The test for Sunday is what we do on Monday. The energy and rationale for what we do on Monday is our music on Sunday. We praise God feeding the hungry and we praise God with song. We work for God praying and listening to Scripture and we work for God caring for the Earth. We listen to God in music, and we listen to others who are different from ourselves. “Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him,” says Paul in our reading from Colossians (Col. 3:17).

So I remind us this morning, that worship is for God. It’s not about us. It’s not about what we like or don’t like. We call it a “service” of worship, the service we render to the God who has given so much to us. We respond to God’s gifts with gratitude. We hear God’s music, or as the ancients put it, the “music of the spheres” and we respond with music of our own. We learn to listen for God’s sound, and we resound (re-sound) it back – an emphatic kind of echo.

Augustine said that anyone who sings, “prays twice,” praising God in both word and music. God is the great music lover, having created not one bird to sing, but millions, creatures who spend their days doing nothing more than singing, and

who do so even though none of us take note. The waves beating upon the shore ceaselessly, the wind rustling the leaves of the trees on summer evenings, and the thunder of the waterfall all sound for the glory of God. Psalms speak of trees clapping their hands for God, and the whole world alive with acclamation. When we sing on Sunday, that's us joining our voices to the praise that permeates a doxological planet. We participate in the music of the spheres.

When we sing hymns, we begin to peel away the superficial from our lives, overcome the body-spirit dichotomy that so plagues us, the rational veneer with which we attempt to paper over our real selves, and we get down into our bones. Music engages our body and passions as well as our mind. Singing and music calms us, encourages us, renews us, and resounds through us. As the psalmist said, "deep calleth unto deep."

In Alex Haley's *Roots*, Kunta Kinte lies on the dirt floor of his slave cabin in the New World where he has been brought from Africa. The horrors of slavery have about obliterated any infantile memory of his native land, of who he was as a free person there. Until that night he hears a woman singing, singing a song in a tune now strange to him, strange but irresistible. It was a song from Africa and its tune awakened long suppressed memories. He remembered that he once had a home. He remembered who he was.

Sometimes on Sunday, as we're busy praising God, we hear our name called in the music. Something stirs in us, and we sing, "This is who I am and am meant to be." We come in slumped over, and then Mary plays an incredible piece on the piano, and we sit up, almost come out of our seats, come alive, and remember who

we are created to be. When Paul urges the church at Colossae to let God's word "dwell in you richly," he lists not only preaching and teaching, as the means to let the Word of God have its way with us but also music (Col. 3:16). When we sing, when we participate in the music, the Word, the Word of God burrows down deep in our being.

Worship, music, gets at the heart of what God in Jesus Christ wants to do with us. The heart of the matter is conversion, in which our desires and longings are transformed, redirected toward more appropriate objects. In praising God, we begin to want what God wants, we see the world as God sees the world, as a place beloved, created, still being created, moving closer to that final great shout of praise called the Kingdom of God, the Beloved Community, the New Creation. As we praise God, we are formed and reformed into God's likeness. Paul says it's like we're seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, and we, looking into that mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another (II Cor. 3:18).

John Wesley called the hymnbook, "a body of practical divinity." A hymn is theology put into practice, performed, embodied. And in a way, that's the whole point of the gospel, *performance*. It is just that we perform for God, not each other. What we believe about God is to be put into practice, embodied. As Isaiah tells us, it's no good just to prattle on about God with our lips; it has to take over our lives. If we become good enough at praising God here on Sunday, in a hymn, we'll be better able to praise God on Monday in a vigil and protest at the courthouse on Monday. Because we resound to God on Sunday, we'll treat our co-workers with respect and the love of Christ on Tuesday. We'll become what we have previously

only professed, we will *be* a hymn. That's what we mean when we say that a hymn is best sung when we know it "by heart," when it's gotten deep inside of us and takes us over. The music becomes who we are. It becomes one with our soul.

Music is a major way we have communion with the saints, the primary opportunity we have to be instructed by the heroes of the faith, to let them lead us in our prayer and praise, to have our spiritual lives enriched, critiqued by them. We know that, in trying to be faithful in our time, we thank God, that God has not left us to our own devices. We have a hymnal, we have St. Bach, St. Watts, St. Dorsey to guide us. When we become empty and unsteady in our faith, we sing with Martin Luther who was hiding out in a castle with a price on his head and excommunicated from the church. Luther, discouraged and afraid wrote, "A mighty fortress is our God...." And in singing that, we come to believe it, we leave here with more faith than when we came. Or we join with Philip Bliss who wrote "It is Well" after the death of his family in a shipwreck at sea and we find ourselves able to sing in midst of great grief. Or we remember December 1955, on the evening after Rosa Parks had been arrested for refusing to sit at the back of the bus in Montgomery, AL. At Ralph Abernathy's First Baptist Church, people came into church knowing they were beginning a long struggle against the powers of segregation and racism, and their first hymn was, "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms." When we sing this hymn, we join with them and discover courage and strength we didn't have before.

One of the reasons that music is so powerful in shaping community, in sustaining us amid oppression or grief, is that it calls us out of the immediacy of our current situation into a world far greater than we could otherwise imagine. Our

individual lives are united and reunited with God's people across time and space; the boundaries of our lives are redrawn.

Writer Anne Lamott tells in her book *Traveling Mercies*, how she first visited the little, African American church, St. Andrews Presbyterian. Lamott was not a believer and was battling drugs and alcoholism, she said, "I loved singing, even about Jesus, but I just didn't want to be preached at about him. To me, Jesus made about as much sense as Scientology or dowsing. But the church smelled wonderful, like the air had nourishment in it, or like it was composed of these people's exhalations, of warmth and faith and peace ... But it was the singing that pulled me in and split me wide open."

She said, "I could sing better here than I ever had before. As part of these people, even though I stayed in the doorway, I did not recognize my voice or know where it was coming from, but sometimes I felt like I could sing forever. Eventually, a few months after I started coming, I took a seat in one of the folding chairs, off by myself. Then the singing enveloped me. It was furry and resonant, coming from everyone's heart."

"Something inside me was stiff and rotting would feel soft and tender. Somehow the singing wore down all the boundaries and distinctions that kept me so isolated. Sitting there, standing with them to sing, sometimes so shaky and sick that I felt like I might tip over, I felt bigger than myself, like I was being taken care of, tricked into coming back to life."

Years ago, I remember Vee Taylor's graveside service. I watched Troy

Taylor, Vee's grieving husband. Troy, almost deaf, and disoriented most of the time, was sitting there in his wheelchair. In his grief and near-deafness there was a sense that he was alone. But when we started singing "Amazing Grace" he straightened up, tilted his head back and sang with all his heart. No longer isolated but in communion with God; no longer alone but now with his friends and loved ones and a community who was more than only those gathered under the tent that day. No longer alone the sounds of God spoke to him and resonated through him, and he resounded them back.

When we sing like that, we are getting a taste, a glimpse of what Revelation says will happen someday, when we, those on earth join with those in heaven in one great hymn to the One in whom we live and move and have our being. Our restless hearts shall know why they have been restless, because God has created each of us for no better purpose than to praise with all that we are, to give God, in our work and our worship, blessing and honor and glory and power forever and forever.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God,  
Mother of us all. Amen.