

“Joyful Noise”
Reverend Bill Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time
September 2, 2018

First Scripture Lesson: Psalm 100

¹Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth. ²Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing. ³Know that the Lord is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. ⁴Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name. ⁵For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.

Second Scripture Lesson: Psalm 150

¹Praise the Lord! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty firmament! ²Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his surpassing greatness! ³Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp! ⁴Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe! ⁵Praise him with clanging cymbals; praise him with loud clashing cymbals! ⁶Let everything that breathes praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!



Sermon: *Joyful Noise*

Music is an amazing and powerful thing. It is ubiquitous in our human experience touching almost every part of our lives across every era of human history. In his book, *This is Your Brain on Music*, author Daniel Levitin writes:

“... Whenever humans come together for any reason, music is there, weddings, funerals, graduation from college, men marching off to war, stadium sporting events, a night on the town, prayer, a romantic dinner, mothers rocking their infants to sleep and college students studying with music as a background ... music is and [always] was part of the fabric of everyday life.”¹

Considering the benefits music contributes to our well-being and our cultural and social identity, you could rank it right up there with fire and the wheel as among the most versatile and creative developments in human history; and just as ancient. “Many researchers [argue] that music (*at least in a primitive form*) pre-dates the emergence of language itself.”²

Music can enchant, excite, celebrate, inspire. Music can both express our emotions and change them. Music nurtures us and helps to form and shape our identities. But music can also form a bridge between dissimilar people. A study done at Heriot-Watt University in Edinburgh, UK showed that musical taste is directly connected to our personality. One of the interesting findings of the study was that, as different as heavy metal rock music may sound from classical music, the people who listen to these different kinds of music have more in common than you might think.

“Both (Heavy Metal and Classical Music) attract listeners with similar personalities but dissimilar ages. Younger members of the personality group apparently go for heavy metal, while their older counterparts prefer classical. However, both have the same basic motivation: to hear something dramatic and

theatrical, a shared ‘love of the grandiose...’ Aside from their age, they’re basically the same kind of person...”³

Famous R&B musician Lou Rawls once said in an interview that “Music is the greatest communication in the world. Even if people don't understand the language that you're singing in, they still know good music when they hear it.”⁴ Poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow put it more succinctly, “Music is the universal language of mankind.”⁵

I experience this first-hand on a regular basis. Our youngest son Harry, who is autistic, struggles to communicate sometimes; it’s just part of being on the spectrum. But when I play the Beatles, we connect. He sings with me and we speak to one another through the words and music of “Penny Lane” and “Strawberry Fields Forever.”

Music is so ingrained in our experience of the world around us that we might not even notice how important it is. Think about how empty our experiences would be without music. Imagine a movie without the soundtrack: *Jaws*⁶ without the threatening, suspenseful theme (duh-dum... duh-dum...), *Star Wars*,⁷ and *Raiders of the Lost Ark*⁸ without John Williams famous orchestral scores; *Gone with the Wind*,⁹ *Chariots of Fire*,¹⁰ and *Psycho*,¹¹ without their iconic sound tracks.

A survey taken in 2009, showed that the British public consider the score from “the shower scene” in the film *Psycho* to be the scariest theme from any film. But originally, Alfred Hitchcock intended there to be no music during the scene. His composer, Bernard Herrmann disagreed and insisted Hitchcock hear the piece he had prepared. When Hitchcock heard the now famous screeching violins and cellos, he not only changed his mind, he doubled Herrmann’s salary for the film!¹²

Music is everywhere. Imagine a trip to the grocery store without Bruno Mars or Justin Timberlake blasting on the radio, or without Muzak playing over the instore radio while you shop. Imagine going for a walk without a happy tune to whistle. Imagine expressing your feelings for your true love without romantic songs to compile on a mix-tape.

Music is commemorative. We write and sing songs about people and things that we respect, that we love; that we miss. Music can take us to a place and time that we remember fondly. The moment you first met; the day you won big; those times when you were truly happy; when all was right with the world. (I can’t hear the Cure’s “Just Like Heaven”¹³ and not be taken back to my senior year of High School.)

Music is a great teaching tool. To this day, I can quote the preamble to the US Constitution because of “Schoolhouse Rock!”¹⁴ And whenever I’m turning the pages of my Bible to find a specific passage, I still sing the little books-of-the-New-Testament song I learned in Sunday School as kid.

Music can motivate us to work harder at the gym. It can express anger and speak a voice of protest to the way things are. Music can inspire us to be better and remind us of our better selves.

But music is also an incredible way that human beings honor and praise people and things they admire. Our national anthem, “God Bless America,” and “My Country ‘Tis of Thee,” were written in praise of these United States and the people who make this country what it is.

Your school's alma mater expresses love and devotion to the school that helped to form and mold you. Whether "Oh Come Let's Sing Ohio's Praise" or "We Hail Thee Carolina and Sing Thy High Praise..." every good alma mater is a song of praise.

We sing "Happy Birthday to You" as a way to honor one another on the anniversary of our coming into the world.

The annals of music history are filled with songs written to honor or praise someone: Most people probably know that the song "American Pie" was written by Don McLean about the death of rock and roll legend Buddy Holly. But did you also know that the song "Killing Me Softly" was written by singer songwriter Lori Lieberman as a tribute to Don McLean?

"Man on the Moon" was written by REM to honor comedian Andy Kaufman. "A Candle in the Wind" was composed by Elton John to honor Marilyn Monroe and then revised several years later to honor Princess Diana. And fans of the show *Parks and Recreation* will know that Andy Dwyer then re-revised it as "5000 Candles in the Wind" to commemorate the passing of Li'l Sebastian.

So, it is only natural that we would use this incredible, diverse, creative gift of music to glorify God; to give thanks to God; to teach about God, and to express our emotions towards God.

The Book of Psalms is a collection of poetry that exemplifies this diverse creative expression. And they were meant to be sung within the context of worship. The word "Psalms" actually comes (via translation to Greek) from the Hebrew word for "Sing."¹⁵

There are several different genres found in the Psalms. There are prayers, complaints, and statements of trust. Some Psalms express thanksgiving, while other Psalms teach, and still others request God's help in a variety of circumstances. And one of the most common genres in the Psalms is the hymn of praise. I'll give you a couple of examples:

Psalm 136:1

O give thanks to the Lord, for God is good, for God's steadfast love endures forever.

Psalm 117:1-2

Praise the Lord, all you nations! Extol Him, all you peoples! For great is God's steadfast love towards us, and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever. Praise the Lord!

Human history is filled with legendary acts of God, creating, interceding, saving, loving beyond our ability to comprehend. It is only natural then that the people who have experienced the goodness and grace of the Almighty would have taken the time to write songs about the experience.

Our experiences of worship are filled with songs like that. John Newton wrote *Amazing Grace*, one of the most well-known and well-loved Christian hymns, as an expression of thanksgiving for his own experience of salvation and redemption.¹⁶

"How Great Thou Art" was written by Carl Gustav Boberg "in 1885 as a result of his experience in a midday thunderstorm, where moments of flashing violence were followed by a clear brilliant sun;" an experience in which he saw and felt the power and majesty of God.¹⁷

In our music we praise and glorify God. And the Psalmist is very clear as to why. Psalm 100 tells us that God is good. God made us and loves us and looks after us like a shepherd does his sheep. The basic statement “God is good,” is profound in its simplicity. It is the faith expressed by so many Christians the world over: God is good, all the time, and all the time, God is good.

The Psalmist teaches us that God’s love for us does not wain when we turn from God or when we sin. That God’s love endures forever and that no matter what, God is faithful. And hopefully, you will remember from last week that faithfulness means to be trustworthy and dependable. God will not depart from us, no matter what. On that you can rely.

These passages essentially sum up the whole of scripture which tells the story of God’s grace, mercy, and steadfast love; a story that proves God is worthy of our songs. This is why we lift our voices to God, because that’s what you do for someone you love, someone you respect, someone you treasure: you write and sing songs in their honor.

But then Psalm 150 tells us a little bit more about those songs. Because, you see, it is easy to say that only some people should celebrate God in song. Only the ones with talent, the ones who can make their fingers dance across the keys of a piano, or pick up a guitar and make its strings sing; only those with voices like the angels should lift them in song; only those who can carry a tune or who know what those funny little marks in your hymnal mean; only they should be allowed to sing. The rest of us should just shut our mouth holes and listen.

And I know that sometimes our experience in this world have cemented those notions. I remember a gentleman I knew at a church in Georgia who served the church in every way imaginable, including being Clerk of Session and serving on my Pastor’s Nominating Committee. But he wouldn’t sing. As a school boy, his chorus teacher told him to not sing because he just wasn’t very good at it. And that stayed with him his whole life.

And I know a lot of folks don’t sing. I’m up here in the front. I can see you. I don’t judge you. I understand. But right here in Psalm 150, the last Psalm and the Psalmist last word to us, we are told “let everything that breathes praise the Lord!” And I know what you’re going to say... and no, you’re not exempt from singing if you just hold your breath for the whole song. We are all called, invited, encouraged to praise God with all that we are, including our voices in song. Because it doesn’t matter what you sound like to the person next to you. We’re not singing for them. We’re singing for God.

Now I know some of you are skeptical. So, I want to take this moment to remind you of something intriguing that you may have missed in the readings this morning. Psalm 100 said “Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth!” A *joyful* noise. It doesn’t necessarily have to be a good one or one that your neighbor finds pleasing. It only needs to be joyful. When we lift our voices in joy, praising God, giving thanks to God, then we are honoring God. And that’s good enough.

I understand, we’re supposed to do our best for God. That’s why people usually try to wear their best clothes to church and are generally trying to be on their best behavior. The Bible is filled with passages that encourage the people of God to bring only their best offerings to God. And often in the church that means it’s assumed that what we, as a congregation present in worship should be the best that we have to offer... which means the choir or the musicians and the truly gifted singers.

But that's not what the Bible says. Our songs of praise are supposed to be joyful. There's nothing here that says they have to sound good to anybody else.

Author Pat Conroy once said that "Without music, life is a journey through a desert that has not ever heard the rumor of God."¹⁸ Music gives life color and flavor. Music reminds us of God's goodness, mercy, and steadfast love. Music gives expression to the beauty and the complexity of life. Music gives voice to that which is deep within us. When we do not have the words, when we can not express the feeling, when we encounter the ineffable and the indescribably, music speaks for us.

So, lift your voices in praise. Sing to God a new song! Because God is good, and God is deserving of our praise.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

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- ³ Collingwood, Jane. "Preferred Music Style Is Tied to Personality." *Psych Central*, Dr. John Grohol, 17 July 2016, psychcentral.com/lib/preferred-music-style-is-tied-to-personality/.
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- ⁵ Longfellow, Henry Wadsworth. *Outre-Mer: a Pilgrimage beyond the Sea*. W.D. Ticknor & Co., 1846, pg. 202
- ⁶ Spielberg, Steven, director. *Jaws*. Performance by Roy Scheider, et al., Zanuck/Brown Productions/Universal Pictures, 1975.
- ⁷ Lucas, George, director. *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope*. Performance by Mark Hamill, et al., Lucasfilm/Twentieth Century Fox, 1977.
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- ¹² "Psycho (1960 Film)." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 26 Aug. 2018, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psycho_\(1960_film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psycho_(1960_film)).
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- ¹⁶ McKim, Linda Jo H. *The Presbyterian Hymnal Companion*. Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993. pp. 199–200.
- ¹⁷ McKim, pg.322
- ¹⁸ Conroy, Pat. *Beach Music*. Doubleday, 1995, pg. 603