



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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MARCH 24, 2019
THE THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT
SIGHT, SOUND AND SILENCE: STILL LENT

Sounds of Faith: Music and Voice Psalm 100; Colossians 3:12-17

Last week we talked about silence as a “sound of faith.” That is because silence and being silent often make space for or help us to hear what we otherwise might miss. The truth is, in our busy and noisy world, actual silence is practically non-existent. You might even argue that it is impossible since even in a sound chamber you can still hear your own heartbeat. Last week I heard an intriguing term: “thick silence.” I was listening to a story on *The Moth* storytelling website. A young woman named Ana described the experience of skydiving for the first time. She explained that after she and her instructor jumped out of the plane, the noise of the wind as they rushed toward the earth was excruciating, but when he told her to pull the ripcord and the parachute opened, suddenly everything went silent. It was not just ordinary, run-of-the-mill quiet, though. She described it as being “thick”—a silence which “does not exist here on earth.”¹ Maybe some of you have experienced it. A number of years ago on vacation at the beach, the dads and children in our family decided to go parasailing. As Catherine and I floated a few hundred feet above the ocean, we both remarked how silent it was up there. I can only imagine how “thick” the silence is several miles up.

The idea of “thick silence” set me to thinking. Imagine, if you will, the absolute silence of pure emptiness, the silence that existed when nothing else did. Try to imagine a silence so deep that you cannot hear a pin drop because there are no pins and there is nowhere for one to fall. Into the silence of that void a voice enters: perhaps bold and commanding or whispered and urging or normal and inviting. The voice of God speaks: “Let there be light!”

That is how scripture describes creation. In the mind and heart of some poetic Hebrew believer was a memory born of faith rather than experience, a recollection of truth instead of fact: there existed the thickest possible silence and then . . . sound . . . a voice . . . words . . . creation! Suddenly there was light and darkness, earth and sky, stars and planets, plants and animals . . . and humans. Then there were sounds: wind moving through

¹Ana Del Castillo, “Jump from a Plane,” *The Moth*; available online at: www.themoth.org.

trees, the purr of the panther, the splash of a fish, the chirp of a cricket, and the song of a bird. Earth began playing its greatest orchestral work—a hymn of praise to the Creator.

The psalmists heard it and sang their own songs of praise:
The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world. Psalm 19:1-4

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth;
break forth into joyous song and sing praises.
. . .
Let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
the world and those who live in it.
Let the floods clap their hands;
let the hills sing together for joy Psalm 98:4, 7-8

Praise the Lord!
Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars!
Praise him, you highest heavens,
and you waters above the heavens!
Let them praise the name of the Lord,
for he commanded and they were created.
Praise the Lord from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps,
fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command!
Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars!
Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds!
Psalm 148:1a,3-5, 7-10

Centuries later, the Apostle John, echoing the creation stories of Genesis, proclaimed:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. John 1:1-3

There was silence. Then God spoke. Words begat creation. Sounds birthed music. Creation sang praise. Faith is speaking and singing, telling and harmonizing, proclaiming and orchestrating. Faith is music and word, instrument and voice.

Speaking at a *Sounds of Faith* program in Chicago nearly a decade ago, Dr. Mark Bangert observed,

I think [Martin] Luther had the best insight and said what others instinctively knew: he reasoned that if Jesus was the Word (as the Gospel of John calls him), then Jesus becomes present in the Words about him. That elevates sound to a new level; the Word of God, then, is innately musical in the Christian scheme of things. The Gospel or the good news about Jesus will invariably turn into music, and so it has been for over two thousand years.²

The Gospel is word and music. Perhaps that is why the Apostle Paul told his friends in Colossae:

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Colossians 3:16-17

Words and music lead to faith and service. Faith and service find expression in words and music. Music says what words alone cannot. Words ride on music like birds on air. Words and music are integral to our faith.

What is it about music that speaks to our faith? As I suggested earlier, the first music was nature's song—the soprano melody of birds, the alto wind brushing through trees, the tenor howl of a wolf, the bass roar of a waterfall, the percussive rhythm of raindrops, and the harmonies of all earthbound creatures. There is something intrinsically musical in nature and there is something in music that strikes a primal chord within us. Perhaps that is why the interplay of music with the spoken and sung word, interspersed with silence, are the key ingredients that shape our worship, the most important thing we do as the people of God.

²Dr. Mark Bangert, "A Christian Contribution," *Sounds of Faith* (The Lutheran School of Theology Chicago (2010); available online at: www.harranfoundation.org).

Music is everywhere, not only in worship. Someone sings the National Anthem before most sporting events. Inaugurations, installations, graduations, coronations, and dedications all include music. We hear music on the radio, on our phones, in our cars, in stores, in elevators. And, when a particular melody burrows its way into your brain, you will hear music in your head all day long!

How can all of this music—and such a variety of music—as well as all of the words that we hear become the sounds of our faith? How do music and words become more than sounds which flow through our ears?

Let's think about our worship. Each week we are blessed with amazing music. The anthems our choir sings can lift our souls to new heights or they can grovel with us in our low points, offering assurance and comfort. Already this morning they have called us to worship and to seek a change of heart, praying that what we do here today will be pleasing to God. A few minutes ago the anthem asked God to sing for us so that we might sing all the better. It called us to “voice our trust and doubt as we groan, or laugh, or sigh.”³ What better prayer could we offer on any day? Anthems may express our praise, our needs, or some aspect of faith that might grow within us.

The instrumental pieces we hear in worship are intended to provide times for reflection and personal prayer. Sometimes I like to close my eyes and listen to the organ. I try to identify the feelings or images created by the music. Sometimes a particular prayer is prompted. What emotions are touched by what you hear? What does the music suggest God might be doing at that moment? What does the music call for me to do? The service music is a fertile pause that allows us to worship in whatever way we need.

Hymns are as much a part of our worship as breathing is a part of our living. They are essential for us. Hymns voice our faith, admit our doubt, and affirm our commitment. In many ways, our hymnals are textbooks of faith. We learn history, tradition, scripture, and theology. We discover fresh images that reveal something unique about God. We hear our lives sung in a variety of ways. Now, I will admit there are some hymns that are wonderful to sing but have some questionable ideas about God. There are other hymns that have tricky tunes that are difficult to sing but wonderful texts that perfectly voice our faith. Yet, they are all worth singing if our intent is to worship God and not simply to entertain ourselves. If we pay attention, we can be

³Adam M.L. Tice, “God of Music, Guide Our Song,” GIA Publications, Inc., 2009.

surprised every week by something we learn about our faith from the hymns we sing.

“Amazing Grace” teaches us one of the most profound truths about our human nature and fallibility and God’s steadfast and redemptive grace. “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee” wraps our experience of faith into a truly joyful praise. A renowned theologian was once asked to name the most important truth he had gleaned from all of his studies. He replied, “Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” These words come, not from a thick theological tome, written by a scholar with multiple letters after his or her name. No, this profundity—which we all know by heart—is from the hymn “Jesus Loves Me” by Anna B. Warner. Hymns teach us about Jesus’ birth, life, death, and resurrection. We learn about God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. We discover what the Church is all about and the many ways we are called to be the people of God. Hymns teach us our faith.

I encourage you week by week to pay attention to the music of worship. Follow along on the anthems and let the words sink into your soul along with the music. Reflect on the words of the hymns as you sing them. What do they tell us about God, about ourselves, about the world, and about the life yet to come? And sing! Sing whether you have a beautiful voice or not. Sing because you want to, because you must! Sing because it is what we do as people of faith.

I also encourage you to save your order of worship to use during the week. Read over the call to worship. Pray the confession each day. Let the affirmation begin your day or make it your prayer before you fall asleep. Think about what you hear and say and sing, not only on Sunday, but every day of the week.

Obviously our voices are important instruments in our music, but any voice—spoken or on paper—is an essential sound of our faith as well. It is important that we learn how to speak our faith. It is also important that we listen to voices other than our own.

Much of scripture is poetic or beautifully written prose. It needs to be read, for certain, but it also needs to be heard. I encourage you to read scripture out loud at times. The psalms are emotional in every way and deserve to be read with passion. Some of the psalms plead with God. Some of them praise God with lyrical beauty. Other psalms are dark and angry and desperate. Some sing. Some cry. Some howl with pain. Read the psalms and discover their voice, then pray them out loud as your own prayers.

Pray the hymns. Try reading a hymn out loud as a prayer. They are all poetic and the images are both earthy and ethereal. They take us to a higher level of experience and they muck around in the grime of human living. Pray the hymns. Try one we mentioned before:

Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.
Little ones to him belong; they are weak, but he is strong.
Yes, Jesus loves me! Yes, Jesus loves me!
Yes, Jesus loves me! The Bible tells me so.

Jesus loves me he who died heaven's gate to open wide.
He will wash away my sin, let his little child come in.

Jesus loves me, this I know, as he loved so long ago,
taking children on his knee, saying, "Let them come to me."⁴

Give voice to the things that we often hear only in music or read in silence. But do not limit your faith adventure to those things that we use in worship. Ask of any song you hear, any book or newspaper you read, any item of interest that comes your way, "What does this have to do with my faith?" "What does my faith have to say about this matter?" "Is there something here that might enlighten me about God?" "Is there something here that God might use to enlighten me about myself or the world?"

Music teaches us about God and ourselves. Music inspires and challenges us as do words voiced and written. Perhaps one of the best things that music and voice do for us is to bring us together.

I have mentioned the *Sounds of Faith* concerts which bring people of various beliefs together to share ways in which music speaks to their faith. In 2014, one such event took place in Rockefeller Chapel at the University of Chicago. Listen to how reporter Lydialyle Gibson experienced that event:

One of the afternoon's most stirring moments, and perhaps one of its most emblematic, came about a third of the way through the concert, when Zeshan Bagewadi—an Indian American opera singer, Hindustani classical musician, and indie rock singer-songwriter—stepped to the microphone to announce a change in the lineup. "I just got the dispatch from my relatives in Ohio," Bagewadi said, "that my grandmother is now on her

⁴Anna Bartlett Warner, "Jesus Loves Me, This I Know," 1859.

deathbed." Haltingly, he told the hushed audience a little bit about her, how she'd raised 10 children and had scores of grandchildren, how she'd lived through the partitioning of Pakistan and India, how she'd endured suffering and hardship, how she'd never lost her sense of humor. He asked for a round of applause to celebrate her life.

Bagewadi would have to cut short his part of the concert. But before he rushed away to his grandmother's bedside in Ohio, he offered one song that had been scheduled for later in the program: "Ave Maria." He wanted to sing it now in her honor. "I've sung this piece a couple of times," he said, "but I must say that I've never felt more compelled to sing this piece than I do right now." Then the music began, and for the next five minutes there wasn't a single cough or shuffle from the audience as Bagewadi's voice, heartbreakingly clear, rose and fell above the lilting organ.⁵

Music brings us together and unites us. I have experienced it when singing "We Shall Overcome" in a community-wide worship service. I experienced it singing our National Anthem after 9/11. I feel it every year during our candlelight service when we lift our light high and sing "Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright." I experience it every Easter morning when we sing with joy and relief, "Christ the Lord is risen today! Alleluia!" A little over a year ago, a friend called me first thing on my birthday and sang "Happy Birthday!" to me. He had never done that before and hasn't since, but my mother used to do it every year. His simple act of kindness expressed in a very common song, was like being wrapped in the comforting arms of God. It was the best birthday gift I could have received.

When we begin to allow music and word of all types to interact with our faith, we will begin to see God involved with every aspect of our lives. Isn't that exactly what God wants for us? Music and word have been around since the beginning. They are gifts of God, given for our enjoyment and edification, for our comfort and encouragement. They fill the sometimes thick silence of our lives with beauty and meaning and insight. With such wonderful gifts to enrich our faith, we cannot help but ask, "How can I keep from singing?"⁶ How can we, indeed?

⁵LydiaLyle Gibson, "Faithful to the Tune, *Sounds of Faith*, University of Chicago, November 2014.

⁶Robert Lowry, "My Life Flows On," 1869.

March 34, 2019

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

O Lord our God, whose steadfast love endures forever, the heavens tell of your glory and the earth sings your praises, from the vibrant colors that accent our world to the gentle songs of the birds that punctuate the air. All that you have created points to you, O God, for out of extravagant love, you give not only what is necessary and useful, but also what is enjoyable and beautiful. Every creature you have made rises with songs of honor and praise, and because of your goodness to us, we can do no less. If we listen closely to the rhythm of our lives, we can hear the music of praise springing forth from within us. Before we were yet born, you, O Lord, have been with us and have cared for us. In the dark places of our lives, you have been the light that will not fail. When it seemed that we could not go on, you have been our strength for one more step. In these moments of worship and in each moment of our lives, we offer our gratitude, Gracious God, for these and all of the good gifts which come from your generous hand.

Even as we praise you for the blessings you have given, we lift up to you those whose lives do not hold the same comfort and abundance which grace our own. We pray for those who themselves lack the faith or the voice to pray or to sing. We pray for mercy for those who no longer have the strength to ask for themselves. We remember those who are sick in body, mind, or spirit, especially those whose names have been spoken and those we name in the silence of our hearts. Relieve their suffering, heal their hurting, give them peace in their turbulent days. We pray, O Lord, that we might be a source of strength in their time of need. Inspire and empower us to comfort those who mourn, to be present with those who are lonely, to be messengers of peace and light in the violent and dark places of our world. And when these responsibilities seem too much for us to bear, remind us that in your grace we find our strength. In your love we discover joy. In your presence we find peace and the reason we cannot keep from singing, now and forevermore. Amen.

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