

Singing Our Faith

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

April 27, 2025 PM Sermon

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Psalm 81:1-2, Ephesians 5:19-20, Revelation 15:2-3

It's so good to have the choir here tonight; we all look forward to hearing these young people sing. There's something particularly beautiful and joyful about young people singing. Part of it is their young voices. When you get older, our voices sound a little less pure, a little more crunchy. We can't hit those high notes anymore. Young voices are pure and there's something particularly beautiful and moving about that sound. More than that, it's just good to see the next generation praise God in song. It's so good to see the next generation sing the old songs of faith and it's good to hear them sing some new songs too. When they sing, we can see faith passing from generation to generation. It's a sign of God's faithfulness.

Our God is, of course, a faithful God. He has maintained his promises for a thousand generations, and tonight is worth recognizing that one of the ways he has always maintained that faithfulness, one of the tools he has used to keep his promises has been music. Music is one of God's great, mysterious, grace-filled gifts and I would like to just spend some time tonight thinking about this gift. I want to say four things.

Music is deeply biblical. Music shows up all through the Bible from the beginning to the end. I read three passages from different parts of Scripture just to give you a tiny sense of that. Just to fill that out, music was there at the beginning of creation. In Job 38, when God answers Job's complaint, the Lord asks Job, "Were you there when I laid the cornerstone of the earth while the morning stars sang together and all the Angels shouted for Joy?" It's a beautiful poetic statement, but it at least suggests the possibility that at the very beginning of things, the heavenly Host sang for Joy when their God brought the world into being. The poetry of Job 38 at least suggests that music was around before the creation of the world. It suggests that maybe music is part of the life of God.

Throughout the rest of the Old Testament music was part of the worship of God's people. When God delivered the Israelites through the Red Sea, Miriam picked up a tambourine and everybody sang a song. And then you have the Psalms. The Psalms are full of calls for us to praise the Lord with singing. Calls like Psalm 81 that I read a little earlier. "Sing for joy to God our strength," it says to us. Even when the Psalms don't explicitly call us to sing, we can still tell that the Psalms are meant to be sung. Psalm 139 for example. Psalm 139 never calls us to sing. It's not about music, but the superscription of the psalm says. "For the director of music." It's like David said to his minister of music, "Hey could you write a tune for this?" All the Psalms underline the importance of singing.

In the New Testament, Ephesians calls us to "Sing Psalms, hymns and spiritual Psalms, sing and make music from your heart to the Lord." All of this is a way of giving thanks to God for what he has done for us in Jesus Christ. And then to round it all off, there is lots of singing at the end of the Bible in the book of Revelation. John's vision shows us people praising God and singing in the heavenly courtroom. "Great and marvelous are all your deeds, Lord God almighty. Just and true are all your ways." So singing is deeply biblical. From the beginning of Scripture to the end, music is part of the story, part of the way we praise.

In addition to being biblical, music has an amazing power to touch our emotions. Sometimes when I watch what happens in churches, sometimes when I watch what happens in our church, I think that power of the music to shape human hearts and human souls is more appreciated than the preaching. In our tradition, what we call the Reformed tradition, the preaching of the word is supposed to be central. But music is deeply beloved by Reformed people as a way to express their faith. I've heard more than a few Christians say about their Church, "We love our church. The preaching's just okay, but the music is amazing."

One of my favorite stories illustrating the emotional power of music revolves around an experience I had when funeral planning early in my ministry. I went to plan a funeral for an elderly woman whose husband had died about 5 years earlier. I suggested to the family that maybe they would like to choose some of the

Bible texts from Dad's funeral for their mom's service. Maybe something from the message in that funeral could be brought into Mom's funeral? What did the pastor preach on? They looked off into space and scratched their heads. They could not remember what the pastor preached on, they could not remember any of the Bible readings.

And then I said, "well, what about the songs? Would you like to sing any of the songs from Dad's funeral?" They could remember every single one of the songs, and not only could they remember them, they said that these songs had been 'ruined' for them. And by ruined they meant that every time these songs were sung in a service, they were transported back to their dad's funeral and to the sense of loss they felt.

When I'm standing up in front of church, I often see people whose emotions are opened up when certain songs are sung. One of our family funeral songs is Jerusalem the Golden. Some of you know that maybe some of you don't. It's an old traditional song which we favor here. Anyway, it has the verse, "How lovely is that City. The home of God's elect, how beautiful the country that eager hearts expect. O Christ in mercy bring us to that eternal shore where Father, Son and Spirit are worshiped evermore." I cannot sing those words and look at my wife, because when I do I will start crying. Which I suppose isn't the worst thing in the world, but being choked up is not helpful for preaching and worship leadership. So, one of the things that makes music such a good gift of God, is its power to touch the emotions.

Music is also memorable. It's amazing how singing something helps you remember it. When I was in 5th grade my teacher, Mr. Sneller, taught us all the books of the Old Testament with a song that he had. I won't sing it for you now, but still today when I go through the books of the Old Testament I know them by heart and I sing the song to help bring them to mind. I just finished quoting Jerusalem the Golden. I quoted to you a whole verse. I've not worked at memorizing that verse, but because I'd sung it somehow it's deeper in my memory than a Bible verse that I'd only read.

And then there's this: I don't know if you've ever seen those videos of dementia patients in nursing homes responding to music. In those videos you'll see older people who are completely unresponsive. You come up to them and talk to them and you barely get any kind of response. But then someone will play music. Someone will play a song from their youth. Maybe they'll play an old hymn and all of a sudden they respond. They move their body rhythmically and sometimes they will even start to sing along. Somehow the music unlocks them, opens their damaged memory.

The power of music to put things in our memory is really important when we think about the importance of music and our spiritual life and why Scripture calls us to sing. When we sing our faith, we plant our faith deep in our memory. It gets formed in our hearts. So, no wonder God keeps calling us to sing! He wants to form our hearts! When we sing the Holy Spirit moves. When we sing the Spirit forms our faith, the Spirit strengthens our hope, and deepens our love.

Which brings me to my final point, music is a teacher. Music teaches us theology. Music is a teacher of Biblical truth. Unfortunately, sometimes it's also a teacher of biblical error. More than you realize, because of the emotional power of music and because of music's power of memory, your theology and your way of seeing God is shaped by the songs you sing. If you sing songs with beautiful words carefully chosen to represent the Bible's teaching, you will gain good biblical/theological roots. On the other hand, if you sing trite songs or maybe the words weren't so thoughtfully put together, you might be getting some funny ideas. I don't want to be overly alarmist about this, I'm not trying to start an inquisition. But when you realize how powerful music is and how it forms your memory and how it shapes your emotions, we ought to eagerly desire good and beautiful and theologically meaningful music.

Because I'm a minister in a traditional church, maybe you think that I'm about to start a rant against contemporary music. "Today's music is theologically shallow, while the great hymns of the faith are rich and tested over time!" Well, there's some truth to some of that, but I don't want to create unnecessary tension between contemporary and traditional worship. The fact is, there are theologically and musically excellent contemporary hymns and there are theologically and musically excellent traditional hymns. There are bad contemporary hymns. Lots of them. And there are quite a few bad traditional hymns too. Both contemporary

and traditional churches need to eagerly seek music that is both beautiful and excellent in its content and its teaching.

Really good hymns can become a touch point for you, a foothold for your faith. I personally have a lot of affection for the third stanza of “Amazing Grace.” “Through many dangers, toils and snares, I have already come. Tis Grace that brought me safe thus far, and Grace will lead me home.” Those words are deep in me. When I’m in the middle of dangerous toils and snares, they come to me and they remind me that grace is present with me in the struggle, grace is working in the trouble, and that God will lead me home. It both assures me of God’s care for me, and it reminds me that the power of the Kingdom is grace, mercy and forgiveness. Both those teachings really matter.

A more modern hymn that means a lot to me is “Jesus Draw Me Ever Nearer.” I think that’s a theologically rich hymn. I love verse 1. “Jesus draw me ever nearer as I labor through the storm. You have called me to this passage and I’ll follow though I’m worn.” There’s something honest about those words and about how following Jesus can be really hard sometimes, and how we Christians can sometimes feel worn out. To me, it’s a song that teaches the truth of 2nd Corinthians chapter 4. “We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard-pressed on every side but not crushed, perplexed but not in despair; persecuted but not abandoned; struck down but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus might also live in our body.” Jesus I will follow, though I’m worn.

But verse 3 is the one that I think really teaches the interesting theology. “Let the treasures of the trial form within me as I go. And at the end of this long passage, let me leave them at your throne. I love this idea that the trials and difficulties of life are indeed forming treasures in us, but ultimately at the end of all things, even these hard-won treasures are not ours; they are to be laid at the throne of our Lord.

Those ‘treasures of the trial’ might be the hardest things for us to lay down. We gave up so much for them. We endured so much. We bled for these treasures. These are things maybe we feel that we’ve earned because we’ve been faithful in the struggle. But these too we joyfully cast before our Lord is an offering of thanks. What a complete act of submission. What a complete act of worship. Reminds me of Romans 12: “Offer your body is a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God. This is your spiritual act of worship.”

Anyway, enough talking about music, let’s hear some music.

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