

Sing, Dance and Praise God!
Psalm 150
Rev. Shannon A White
Wilton Presbyterian Church
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People have long known it... composers have long known it, and the writers of the Psalms, including the writer of our text this morning, definitely knew it... “Music is good for the soul.”

Throughout the Hebrew scriptures, the children of Israel sang and danced as expressions of their praise for God. After God led them out of Egypt, and through the parting of the Red Sea, leading them safely beyond the encroaching armies of Pharaoh, the scriptures say in Exodus 15:20, “Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron’s sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. And Miriam sang to them: Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.”

And there are many more examples in the scriptures of people, including King David, who sang and danced in praise to God.

In our text today, the Psalmist in this closing piece of the Fifth Book of the Psalms tells us in the loudest voice possible, and with all instruments available, to Praise the Lord!

Professor Kelly Murphy writes “perhaps, with its call to praise loudly, unabashedly, with music and dance, a call directed at everything that breathes, Psalm 150 is a stark reminder that for the world of the ancient Israelites, praise abides above and beyond all else, even above and beyond a reason for praise. Hallelujah, no matter what or why.” (Kelly Murphy, Central Michigan University, 2016)

I'm not going to spend time talking about the why's here. But I can point to examples of where praise-filled music has helped and worked to heal those who needed it and even bring life out of extremely difficult situations. According to the evidence, music... the expression in song and through instruments – is good for your health as well – and that's extremely spiritual.

According to *Psychology Today*, in an article entitled, "Music is Good for Your Soul and Your Health, "Study after study has found that music therapy has a positive effect on a broad range of physical and psychological conditions including dementia, anxiety, depression, and cancer." (*Psychology Today*, August 11, 2017)

I'll never forget, when I was doing a year-long chaplaincy residency at Hartford Hospital, one of my assignments was at a nursing home. Every week, I would lead worship for the residents, some of whom were alert, and some were not. Nevertheless, week after week, they came.

There was this one woman who caught my attention early on... her name was Lucille. Lucille was at a stage of her dementia where she appeared not to recognize those around her. She didn't speak or have any expression which I could tell. She required an aide pretty much 24/7. And she would rock back and forth to soothe herself.

Early on, one day when I was leading worship, I asked those gathered to join me in the Doxology and the Lord's Prayer. Lucille, still rocking, joined right in: "Our Father..." and the same with the Doxology: "Glory be to the Father..." I was astounded at the way music and that familiar prayer reached deep within her psyche... where no human aide could.

But we know, too, that worshipful music in our lives is not always sung when we are full of joy.

Music helps us when we are in pain, and can help us in lament and somehow help us through in faith as we connect with the God who created us... and who loves us intimately.

Horatio Gates Spafford lived from 1828-1888 (60 short years). He was a successful senior partner at a law firm in Chicago and owned several properties in the city. He married Anna Larsen, the love of his life, and they had a son and four daughters. Spafford was a student of the scriptures and the family was extremely devout Presbyterians. Horatio was an elder in the church. They had everything going for them in life. Until they didn't.

At the pinnacle of his career, the family tragically lost their son. Not long after that, in 1871, the Great Chicago fire destroyed nearly every property that Horatio and his wife owned. Just two short years later, Horatio decided to send his wife and four daughters to Europe to rest and recoup from all of the pain they had endured. His plan was to join them in England after he finished wrapping up some business, and visit their friend and preacher, Dwight Moody. Just a few days later, he received a telegram from his wife saying their steamship had wrecked, killing 226 people including their four young daughters. Anna was the sole survivor.

Horatio got on a ship... sailing over the same territory where he had lost his daughters, and penned the famous hymn "It Is Well with My Soul." The first verse is this:

When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,

When sorrows like sea billows roll;

Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to know,

It is well, it is well with my soul.

Chorus:

It is well, (it is well),

With my soul, (with m y soul)

it is well, it is well with my soul!

Music has also served, and continues to serve, to help motivate people with hope during times of social justice and activism. During slavery and the civil rights movement in this country, Spirituals were sung not only to soothe those who faced horrors and back-breaking work, they also were sung as code to tell other slaves about impending escape plans. “Steal Away” and “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” were sung to signal people to escape via the Underground railroad...Those spirituals are still sung even now.

And then we know of songs sung in personal devotion or in congregational worship: Like this one I learned long ago, and which comes to me sometimes when I am in prayer:

I love you, Lord,

And I lift my voice

To worship You

Oh, my soul, rejoice!

Take joy my God

In what You hear

May it be a sweet, sweet sound

In Your ear

So, on this day, in these times of lament and grief, of fear, or sorrow, in these times of social justice as well as in times of love and joy... sing, dance, play your instruments and Praise the Lord!

Sarah Pfisterer will help us do that right now, as she sings “The Simple Song” from *Bernstein’s Mass*.

May it be so... alleluia! Amen~~