

The Word that Makes the Music

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I want to ask you to do something that's not really fair tonight and that is to imagine the world without any music. I say it's not fair because all of the music we have heard tonight has been magnificent and all of it, at least for me, is music that I would like to hear again, and yet imagine the world without any music. Imagine that there are no cds, no cassette tapes, no record albums with your favorite songs. Imagine that there is no music on the radio, only talking. Imagine that there is no musical tone when you turn on your computer, no melody to play when your cellphone rings. Imagine that there are no sonatas and no cantatas, no concertos, no operas, no symphonies. Imagine that there aren't any instruments, no violas, no trombones, no pianos, no tympani. Imagine that there is no music in the worship of the church, no hymnals. With apologies to those in the balcony, no choirs, no music directors, no musicians. Imagine a world without any music. But of course, you can't imagine it because the world is full of music and we are only designed to live in a universe that sings. Some of us are deaf and have not yet heard the melody but even we feel the rhythm of the music around us. And even our conversation makes a kind of music, the rise and fall of pitch that gives human speech its musicality. The world is full of music.

Last Sunday night after church as we were walking home through the streets of the city, we heard a songbird in full throat, "Mockingbird," I said as we stopped beneath his tree. It has to be. The bird was warbling haphazardly through his repertoire, snatches of song stolen from other birds, echoes of urban traffic, improvisations all his own, and rumors of melodies from heaven. It has always been this way since the day the world was made. When God created the universe, he blessed it with all of the potentialities of its music.

It is said that Pythagoras was the first to talk about the music of the spheres. Pythagoras was interested in calculating the mathematical and musical structures of things. He believed that the universe was made of numbers and not just numbers but also notes. It was music that made everything hum and who is to say that he was wrong?

The book of Job tells us that when the cornerstone of creation was laid, you can read about this in Job 38, that the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy. Maybe that's all metaphor, if it is then it shows that you can't even talk about creation without talking about music. But maybe it's not merely a metaphor. Physical objects have their own discreet resonances and maybe as God hurled the galaxies into

space, each star had its own note to sing making music for its Maker's praise. Creation was the first concert and the universe has been making music ever since.

Well, if we were made to make music, then there must be music in the church and Psalm 33:3 tells us what kind of music there must be. You can see this verse printed for you in the program tonight. You can also see it if you turn in your church Bible to page 463 where we consider primarily verses 3 and 4 of Psalm 33. This remarkable third verse, which as it happens is the theme verse for our annual concert series here at Tenth Church, mentions four main ways that people can participate in music for the glory of God. The whole community can be involved because everyone has a part in the musical worship of God.

First, we can sing. The verse begins with this simple imperative, "Sing." And from the total context of this Psalm, we understand that this singing is for God and for his glory. In this Psalm, which itself is a song, the Psalmist speaks of having joy in the Lord, verse 1; of giving thanks to the Lord as he says in verse 2, of waiting for the Lord as it says near the end of the Psalm in verse 20, of being glad in the Lord, verse 21, trusting in the Lord, hoping in the Lord, verse 22. You see, the Lord God is the object of all of this praise and of all our praise. It is to him that we raise our song in the assembly of his people. We sing to the very same God who gave us our voice.

And second, we can play. To be specific, we can play skillfully on the strings like the lyre and the ten-stringed harp that are mentioned in verse 2, and how wonderful to have begun our service tonight with music on the harp. Of course, the Psalmist is not ruling out here the other sections of the orchestra, the point is not that God likes cellos better than he likes bassoons, no, the point is that whatever instrument God has given us to play, we should play it as well as we can and we should play it for the glory of God.

The word "skillfully" I think is important here because it shows that we should offer God our very best. Psalm 100, as you may know, talks about making a joyful noise to the Lord. Well, that's important too because God knows what is in our hearts and if we are going to offer him anything in worship, he wants us to offer it with true spiritual joy that is given to him from the heart. And that idea of making a joyful noise is also encouraging, especially for those who are not musicians because even if we can't make a very tuneful noise, at least we can make a joyful noise by the grace of God. But here in Psalm 33, we see that God also has a passion for excellence and that, therefore, the Psalmist rightly calls for music to be skillfully played.

Then he tells us to shout, not just to sing, you see, but also to shout, and here's a third way that we can participate in music and particularly in worship music. The kind of shouting that the Psalmist has in mind is specifically shouting that gives praise to God. It is that verbal affirmation that the congregation gives in response to the singing and the playing of God's praise.

Now we know from the Old Testament, you can read about this in 1 Chronicles 23, that in those days there were some 4,000 musicians who served at the temple in Jerusalem.

Many of them were singers. Others were assigned various instruments to play. You can get a little bit of a sense of the kind of music they had from reading that chapter of God's word. And so as the people of God participated in public worship, they often heard the music of gifted musicians and as they listened to this music, their hearts were moved to join in the worship of God. Surely we have experienced that ourselves tonight. And even when it was not their turn or perhaps even their gift to sing or to play, they could still give praise to God with the gratitude of a joyful heart and from time to time they would shout to God. "Praise God!" they would say, or to put it in the Hebrew language, "Hallelujah!" And they would also say, "Amen!" which means, "Yes, Lord! That praise is my praise. That praise which I have just heard with my ears is exactly the praise I want to offer to you now with my heart." And as a verbal expression of that, the people would sometimes say, "Amen!" or "Praise God!" or some other affirmation and acclamation of praise to the God who had given the gift of music.

Then there is one more participant the Psalmist mentions. Can you tell who it is as you look at verse 3? It's a person who seems especially important tonight and that is the composer. Now there's always a place for improvisation in music and yet for music to be played at the very highest level, there must be someone to create it and we can say beyond that, someone to write it, to record it, to put it in a form that can be used by others. And I think we see this verse from the Psalms referring to that person at least indirectly when it calls for a new song because just ask the question, "Who will write this new song?" Well, it must be someone with the skill to write it, and we are making good use of that skill tonight as the choir sings anthems composed by musicians who have written new music for the church.

Now what specifically does the Bible mean when it speaks of a new song? Well, you might think and it seems rather obvious on the face of things that it means a song that has never been sung before, a new composition, but yet we need to add something to that because in the Bible a new song is almost always connected to a new experience of God's grace. If you read some of the information about the anthem sung tonight, you'll get a sense of that, a Psalm written in response of praise to God for the ministry of some individual or some other occasion that called forth a song of praise to God.

A good example from the Scriptures is the song of Moses in Exodus 15. You'll remember the situation that God had just delivered his people from Egypt from their slavery and bondage, and he had brought them through the Red Sea on dry land, and as soon as they reached that other shore, Moses began singing praise to God. He sang that fresh new song of the horse and the rider. We see the same thing in many of the Psalms in the Scripture as the people of Israel enjoy some new experience of the grace of God, the coronation of a king, for example, or a return from exile. They sing a new song of praise to their God.

Sometimes that experience of God's grace is not national but personal. A man like David, for example, is delivered from his enemies and he composes a new Psalm to mark that occasion, and so the book of Psalms was Israel's living growing hymnal, and as the years passed, God's people had more and more reasons to give praise to their God.

It may not be obvious at first but there are some hints that Psalm 33 is that kind of Psalm. It opens with the command to praise God with all kinds of music, you see that in verses 1 to 3, but then it gives a good reason for this praise. Why did the Psalmist want to write this Psalm? Why should the righteous shout for joy to the Lord? Why should they thank him? Why should they make melodies to him? Why should they sing and play and shout? Well, the Psalmist gives his answer at the beginning of verse 4, and then in various ways in the rest of his song, "For the word of the LORD is upright." It is the word, you see, that makes the music, the word of God that testifies to his saving work.

You see, God never tells us to praise him without first doing something or being something that deserves our praise and here the Psalmist above all things wanted to call special attention to the gift of God's word. He speaks about it in verses 6 to 9, he explains that it was by his word that God made heaven and earth and all the waters of the sea. God spoke and the universe came into existence. And of course, this was only the beginning of all the things that God has done by his word. It is by his word that God reveals his character as the Lord of the nations, the Lord who sees his children, who delivers them from death, who keeps them in his steadfast love, and it is all of the other things described in this marvelous Psalm. It is by his word that God gives us life and then teaches us how to live in a way that is pleasing to him. It is by his word that God teaches us to pray and to praise like we're being taught to do tonight through the Psalms. But above all things, it is by his word that God brings us to the knowledge of salvation in Jesus Christ. How is it that we will know that we are sinners in need of a Savior? Well, we know this because we've read it in God's word and we know it because God's word shows us in so many ways that we can't live up to the perfection that God requires.

So the word shows us our need for mercy, our need for forgiveness, our need for salvation, and then beyond that the word shows us that we do, indeed, have a Savior. It's the word that shows us that Jesus died on the cross for sinners. It's the word that shows us that he was raised from the dead with the power of eternal life. It's the word that proclaims to us that God has grace for us if only we will confess our sins and put our trust in Jesus Christ for salvation. And as the word is showing us all of these things, as we read it, as we hear it preached, as we study it and meditate on it, as we immerse ourselves in the word of God, the Holy Spirit uses that word to bring us to faith in Christ. This is all the work of God's word and so you can see how appropriate it is for the Psalmist to praise God for the gift of his word.

Then once we have come to Jesus for that salvation, that very same word then becomes the theme of our music and of our song. "Your statues have been my songs," the Psalmist said. "My tongue will sing of Your word." And you see, this is very important to understand about the place of music in worship. Music, of course music is never its own reason for being, it's always for God as a gift that we return to his praise, but in worship, music is also the servant of God's word. It's a partner to preaching in the proclamation of saving truth. "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly," the Scripture says, "teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God." And you'll notice there that the apostle, this is from Colossians 3, speaks specifically of the singing of Psalms. You see, the

worship music of the church is one of those places where God's word is meant to dwell in us richly, the music that the praise of God in music is intended to communicate the truth of God's word.

I wonder if you've noticed the way that every aspect of music worship in the church serves to help in the proclamation of God's word? Of course, good biblical hymns and anthems do that in a very direct way, they communicate God's word in their very texts. All you have to do is read through the bulletin tonight and you'll see a good healthy portion of the word of God from this Psalm and that Psalm. The music is communicating the text of Scripture, but even instrumental music has its role to play in receiving God's word. We hear instrumental music and it prepares us to receive the word of God as we wait in quietness for what God has to say to us in his word. Or perhaps and you'll get a sense of this in the post-lude to tonight's service, that music is part of a response, a joyful response to the hearing of God's word. Instrumental music, too, is in the service of the word of God. I think this is part of what Luther meant when he said that God has preached his Gospel through music too. Or listen how Robin Leaver has described the role of music in worship, "Its function is to proclaim the word of God to the people of God. Sometimes this is done through the single voice, sometimes through the combined voice of choir and instruments, sometimes through instrumental music alone. And then there is that unique proclamation of the whole people of God when they join their voices in one in psalmody and hymnody as they proclaim their response of faith to God and give witness of that faith to each other. All of the church's great composers have understood the proclamatory nature of their art, that through it the eternal sound of God's grace focused in Jesus Christ is made known and shared with his redeemed." And is it not the case that music has done that very thing tonight, that it has proclaimed the eternal sound of God's grace focused in Christ and that we have experienced together as we have sung praise to God that joyful response of faith?

The music of the church will do that proclaiming work best when it is saturated with the word of God, when it is the word, you see, that makes the music. First God's word gives us something to sing about and play about and shout about it and compose about. The word teaches us the grace of God in Christ. It puts the song into our hearts, but then the word also makes the music in another sense, it becomes the theme and the text of our song, and no doubt our composers tonight would want to offer the same testimony that Luther gave in the preface of a little collection of his hymns when he said, "We have put this music on the living and holy word of God in order to sing, praise and honor it. We want the beautiful art of music to be properly used to serve her dear Creator and his Christians. He is thereby praised and honored and we are made better and stronger in faith when his holy word is impressed on our hearts by sweet music." And then Luther closed his remarks with a prayer, he said, "God the Father with Son and Holy Spirit, grant us this," in other words, may the Triune God grant us this strengthening of our faith by impressing his word on our hearts with sweet music.

And how magnificent it is when this prayer is answered in our own experience of music in the church, music that proclaims the word of God. What a joy it is to join God's people in singing God's praise. What a blessing it is when that singing is accompanied by music

that is skillfully played. How refreshing it is to sing a new song that gives new worship to the same Almighty God. And yet as wonderful as all of that is, we should remember that tonight we are only still in rehearsal and that the best music is yet to come.

I've been meditating in recent weeks on a marvelous prophecy from Isaiah, Isaiah 38:20, it says, "The LORD will save me, and we will play my music on stringed instruments all the days of our lives, at the house of the LORD." Now that's a testimony of a musician who has been saved by grace. He says, "The LORD will save me." He's confident of his salvation, his eternal salvation. He's looking forward to his eternal salvation in Christ, and also appears to be the testimony of a composer because he says, "we will play my music," but really the best thing about that promise is that it's music that never ends, that the house of our God will be filled with music as we write, as we play, as we sing his praise for all of our days.

I sometimes wonder what instrument I might play in God's orchestra. I like to imagine that one of the first things that I will do when I get to heaven is sign up for music lessons. First I'll need to ask Jesus what instrument, if any, I have the gift to play. Maybe I'll be a composer. That seems rather unlikely. Maybe I will be, who knows? Maybe I'll be a singer. Maybe I'll just shout. I don't know but there must be some way for me to participate in the musical worship of God because that is what I was made for and that is what the Scripture promises I will be doing all of my days.

At the end of the Bible, there's a wonderful promise about the music that we will make together in glory. In his vision of heaven when he was taken up into the courts of God, John heard all of the angels and all of the saints singing praise to Jesus Christ and he describes what they are singing as a new song, a fresh song, a new response to the grace of God now consummated in his eternal kingdom and the words of that song went like this, "Worthy are You, that is, worthy are You, Lord Jesus Christ to take the scroll and to open its seals, for You were slain and by Your blood You ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and You have made them a kingdom and priests to our God and they shall reign on the earth." Now those are only the words. I can't tell you the music because John hasn't written the notes in Scripture, the Bible doesn't come with the notes, it only gives us the text of the songs, we have to write our own music in this life, but I can tell you what the people did when they heard that music, they fell down on their faces before God and they worshiped him. I can hardly wait.

Our Father in heaven, we give You praise for the gift of music and beyond that we give You praise for the gift of something to sing about because of the salvation that we have in Jesus Christ. It's the word of salvation that's put the music into our hearts. We rejoice in it tonight, our Father and we pray that in days to come both in this life and in our eternal glory, that we may yet offer You sweeter, purer and more joyful praise. In Jesus' name. Amen.