“Music in Worship”
Scripture – Psalm 149:1-6a
Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, September 1, 2013

1 Praise the LORD! Sing to the LORD a new song, his praise in the assembly of the faithful.
2 Let Israel be glad in its Maker; let the children of Zion rejoice in their King.
3 Let them praise God’s name with dancing, making melody to God with tambourine and lyre.
4 For the LORD takes pleasure in his people; God adorns the humble with victory.
5 Let the faithful exult in glory; let them sing for joy on their couches.
6 Let the high praises of God be in their throats.

The final five psalms in the Book of Psalms all begin and end exactly the same – with the Hebrew: “Hallelu-yah” which means “Praise Yahweh” or as most English Bibles translate: “Praise the Lord.” Psalm 149 places a heavy emphasis on praising God by singing and making music.

Music is neither a luxury of life nor an add-on. It is vital to human flourishing. Friedrich Nietzsche said: “Without music, life would be a mistake.” Indeed, some have described hell as a place where there is no music. I suspect hell is either devoid of all music or it has loud speakers blaring over and over in an endless loop, Pat Boone singing “Mairzy doats and dozy doats and liddle lamzy divey!” Even if that’s one of your favorites, you have to admit that hearing it 24/7 would be maddening!

Outside of worship, music is directed toward an audience, but when people of faith worship, each piece of music – choral or instrumental – is directed toward God. When we attend a concert, the music is intended for those of us who have shown up to listen. When I listen to songs on my iPod during a run, the music is for me. I use it to distract my mind from the miles ahead and to inspire me to keep moving when my feet start dragging. CDs and music videos are aimed at audiences that can range from one to millions. Most music in our culture is a performance that is intended to entertain and we applaud. But, in worship, music is played and sung, for an audience of one – the Creator of heaven and earth.

That is not to say that we do not benefit from hearing sacred music or singing a hymn or spiritual song. We can be moved to tears or injected with courage; we can be drawn closer to God or inspired to action. Sacred music can give voice to deep longings or help us gain a new perspective; it can calm our soul and create internal peace or revive our hope in a new day.

Often hymns, anthems and musical pieces undergird, reinforce and expand the message of Scripture and sermon. Music can take words that have been embraced by our minds and imbed them in our bones.
Music can touch deep places within us and transport us to different times. That’s why some people will love a particular hymn even though they may not agree with the theology it expresses. The music resonates with them despite the words, because it carries them back to a childhood memory or a special occasion.

Music engages a part of us that is not simply cerebral and expresses thoughts and feelings in a way that words alone cannot. Music can be a vehicle to express an intuition or a feeling that stirs in our souls but is beyond language. Gustav Mahler said, “If a composer could say what he had to say in words he would not bother trying to say it in music.” And in a related vein, Victor Hugo said, “Music expresses that which cannot be said but on which it is impossible to remain silent.”

With those thoughts in mind, we are going to sing the first verse of a number of hymns in our hymnal. Hymns that come from different periods of history, hymns that express different emotions and hymns that affirm different expressions of faith.

Do not hold back because you cannot sing on key. Hitting the right notes is nice, but not obligatory. I learned this from a good source – my father. Growing up, I remember standing next to Dad in church and singing hymns. He rarely hit the right note, but he made up for it by singing loudly and with enthusiasm! It was not especially pleasing to my ears, but then again, he wasn’t singing to me. I suspect that the One to whom it was addressed found it glorious.

I invite you to sing joyfully as we sing the first verse of eight different hymns that Paul has chosen.

**Singing our Faith:**

**A Celebration of Hymnody Through the Ages**

260 A Mighty Fortress is Our God  
*Written by Martin Luther, this has become the signature hymn of the Protestant Reformation.*

276 Great Is Thy Faithfulness  
*One of the few gospel hymns that specifically addresses God.*

387 Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us  
*Written for a collection of “Hymn for the Young”*

341 Blessed Assurance, Jesus Is Mine  
*Words by Fanny Crosby, who wrote more than 8,000 gospel song texts during her lifetime.*

403 What a Friend We Have in Jesus  
*Irish-born Joseph Scriven wrote this text for his mother as a source of comfort when she was seriously ill.*

356 Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing  
*Set to an American folk tune, this text is by an English pastor who began his career as a barber.*

546 The Day Thou Gavest, Lord, Is Ended  
*An evening hymn, which we don’t normally sing on Sunday mornings. This hymn was sung at the Diamond Jubilee Service of Queen Victoria in 1897.*

379 My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less  
*Just a good ol’ “thumper!”*
Eternal God, we give you thanks for your gift of music. For songs of praise that express our thanks to you, for joyful hymns that lift our spirits, for tender songs that draw us closer to you and others, for haunting melodies that give voice to our sorrow, for rousing hymns that boost our commitment, for humorous songs that make us laugh and for poetic hymns that convey divine wisdom.

Mighty God, you created us in your image to bind us close to you, to bind us together with others and to reflect what is right and true, beautiful and inspiring, liberating and loving, just and generous. But the events of the past week remind us that there is also hideous evil in the world. There are those whose craving for power and desire for control will stop at nothing to maintain their position of privilege despite the suffering of the citizens for whom they are responsible. The war in Syria has claimed more than 100,000 lives, destroyed homes and hospitals, and turned two million people – half of them children – into refugees. And now we learn that the government has used poisonous gas to murder over 1,000 adults and more than 400 children – teenagers, young children, toddlers, babies.

God, sometimes we wonder if the human race has failed this great experiment of yours – to see if people can pursue the wellbeing of one another and live in harmony. Through prophets and priests you urge us to strive for the light of goodness, but too many are lured into the darkness of destruction. Why, O Lord, can we not settle disputes without killing one another?

God of justice, we know that the use of chemical weapons crosses a dangerous threshold that the international community recognizes as heinous and taboo. The leaders of our own government ponder how to respond to this outlawed weapon. Will a military strike convince the Syrian regime to never use such banned substances again or will it provoke a defiant resolve to exterminate even more? Will a strike signal others that the consequences for similar action is too high, or will others imagine that they will be the exception? Will a failure to respond encourage more abhorrent actions? God, the way forward is shrouded in haze. We pray that you will speak wisdom to our leaders, and that they will discern the best response, given a terrible situation.

Gracious God, this past week we also celebrated a stirring moment in the history of our country; the day 50 years ago when your servant Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke of a dream for a better country. Thanks be to you, that in addition to viscous leaders who commit atrocities, there are also people of faith who strive to spread your kingdom on earth. King’s dream was grounded in divine principles we discover in Scripture and we pray that his dream, founded on your vision, will become a guiding light for the world.

We pray that everyone will recognize that all people are your beloved children, that all should be treated equally, that “your children should not be judged by the color of their skin,” nor their gender, nor their nationality, nor their sexual orientation, nor their financial condition, nor their mental or physical capability, nor their religious faith but rather “by the content of their character.” And we pray that all will see the virtue in sitting down with one another at the same table – the table of kinship – where everyone is embraced as a brother or a sister.

God, you dream for a world of justice and compassion and peace. We pray that we will embrace your dream and do everything in our power that your will may truly be done on earth as it is in heaven. This we pray in the name of the one who taught us to pray together…