

Sharon United Church
1 Samuel 16: 14-16, 22-23,
Psalm 150, 2 Samuel 6: 1-5

Music is God's Language

D. G. Laird
July 20, 2003

I have been preaching for some 35 years, but I have never preached on the subject of Music.

But Music has been the backdrop of my life! I don't remember a time in my life without music! My first music was a lullaby sung by my Mother.

One of my fondest memories of my childhood was bedtime in our house in South Hill, Vancouver, 535 E. 46th. My bedroom was on the top floor. The piano was in the living room, at the foot of the staircase, almost under my room. Mom and Dad would sing hymns, Mom playing the piano. "Sun of my Soul", "When he cometh". I can still remember them. I learned them.

Music was never my vocation, but it was always my avocation. Perhaps Music was always my unsalaried Vocation, and the rest were Avocations with salaries. Music was always there for me. If there weren't musical instruments to play (there was always a piano) I would make them out of cardboard boxes.

But how does this all relate to the Bible and to a Sermon about the Word of God?

Music is the backdrop of the Bible. It surprised me to see how large a part it plays in the Old Testament and the New Testament.

It appears that we have instinctively always needed music, and if we didn't have it, we created it!

If you are interested in this subject, you might turn to the back of your Bible. Often you will find a page there which illustrates some of the musical instruments which are mentioned in the Bible. In the pew where I normally sit on Sunday, the Bible offers, along with a page of weights and measures, maps and a Hebrew Calendar, a page of illustrations of: Various kinds of stringed instruments (Harp, Sustum, Viol, 10 stringed instrument, Zither), two kinds of cymbals (loud, and high-sounding), a shepherd's pipe, a trumpet and a Shofar (Ram's horn).

Further research indicates that many of the instruments called simply "pipes" were actually reed instruments, an early form of clarinet. A mouthpiece of one of

these instruments, discovered near Aqaba, proves this point.

What were all these instruments used for? They helped set the mood on feast days and celebrations. They accompanied the wailing of women in their lamentations. Musical instruments were present in all aspects of life.

Examples:

King David as a youth played the lyre (a stringed instrument, akin to a guitar). When King Saul was having great trouble sleeping he sent for someone who could strum some soothing music to him (1 Samuel 16,) the servants of Saul asked that he "seek out a man who is skillful in playing the lyre; and when the evil spirit from God is upon you, he will play it and you will be well."

On the happy occasion when the Ark of the Covenant was completing its journey with the Children of Israel, to take up permanent residence in Jerusalem, the entry was accompanied by all kinds of musical instruments (2 Sam 6: 1-5). "And they carried the ark of God upon a new cart... "And David and all the house of Israel were making merry before the Lord with all their might, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals."

The Psalms were the song-book of the Hebrew nation. Many of the 150 psalms are directed to "the Chief Musician". There seems to have been a protocol for many of the psalms, how exactly they were to be sung (or played!). The meaning of many of these references are lost to us today.

The Hebrew Nation was not alone in its use of music to enhance all occasions.

But the search for the origins of music in any culture is doomed to failure. When music is played or sung, it is experienced and then it is over! Nothing remains but the memory of it in the minds of the hearers. The only artifacts which remain of early music are representations on ancient pottery. The instruments are shown, the music can only be imagined!

The writing of music in musical forms is a fairly recent innovation. We may have seen early forms of written music: staves with square or round notes on them - manuscripts from the 1400's or 1500's. We have retained nothing from before those dates. And even those early attempts at written music do not show exactly how the music was to be played or sung.

It is clear that each culture felt the need to express its emotion with the beating of drums, the plucking of strings and the blowing of pipes or trumpets. It is not clear whether singing came before playing or whether singing and playing grew hand-in-hand.

This morning we passed the crowds lined up to go into the Vancouver Folk Festival at Jericho Park this morning. This morning there will be some Gospel workshops. It is impossible to conceive of a folk festival without there being "song" and "musical accompaniment". Or do I mean instrumental music, enhanced by singing?

It is about now that I realize that the sermon on "Music as the Word of God" cannot be accomplished in one sermon. It would have to be a series of sermons!

My involvement in "organized musical study" had a checkered beginning. My brother Doug played the violin beautifully. He took lessons from Douglas Stewart, renowned in Vancouver musical circles. I remember Doug playing in the orchestra for a school musical on Gypsy theme. I must have been five years of age, but the haunting refrain of "Play, Fiddle, Play" stayed with me for the next 65 years. We found the music a year ago and now play the number in our band!

My parents secured a 1/2 size violin for me, and I joined my brother in Douglas Stewart's lessons. This lasted long enough for Doug and I to have one of my favourite portraits taken, of the two of us, holding our violins at the ready!

Next I was transferred to the piano, which lasted until I was entered into a music festival. I had reason to know that had I played I faced humiliation. So I said "No!" and I wouldn't explain why! That was the end of this part of my formal musical training.

Significantly, it was when I decided myself to take up an instrument, in my case the clarinet, that I became engaged in musical performance, which has carried me for all the intervening years. I was in Grade 7 at Point Grey Junior High School, when a man with a trumpet and a shock of white hair, came into the classroom and asked "who would like to join the band?". The man was Arthur W. Delamont, and the school band led me into the Kitsilano Boys Band. The rest of my musical training took place in that band, both in Canada and on a trip to England, Scotland, Ireland and Holland. (Right after the service today I need to travel to the Jericho Army base to be part of the second rehearsal for the Kitsilano

Alumni Band, who are playing at the Kitsilano Showboat tomorrow night at 7:30 p.m.)

There are people in the congregation today whose lives, and music, intersected with mine at strategic points in my life. Donna (Killick) McTaggart was the best piano player I had heard in my youth. In Ryerson United Church, while there were still evening services, our family would be invited with other Church people after the evening service to the Killick's household. I can still picture the living room, it is fresh in my mind, Donna's Cousin Wilf Evans had his violin, Donna was playing the piano (I think) Mrs. Killick was playing a Chord Organ, and we were all singing hymns. It was a magic time which I never forget!

There are also people here from the St. Andrew's, Maple Ridge, which was the last congregation I served in a formal way. In previous congregations I had occasionally brought an instrument into worship, but the encouragement I felt in St. Andrew's was exceptional. It was a congregation filled with great musicians, not the least of whom was Blaine Lewis, a fabulous accompanist. It was in this congregation that I felt the most unifying aspect of music and word in my own life.

A surprise for me happened the day I played Amazing Grace on the Alto Saxophone on the occasion of a funeral. Belle Morse (who later become a beloved Mayor of Maple Ridge) came up to me and asked me to do a cameo performance in her ongoing musical review group "the MerryMakers". This participation became a semi-annual event until Belle's untimely death.

How can Music be the Word of God? Doesn't there need to be words, to be Word?

Music involves all the senses, not just the mind, eyes and the vocal chords, but the ears, the lungs, the arms and legs, the whole body, the whole being.

Like in dancing, the whole body participates. Music harmonizes the senses with the feelings.

Our forbears in the Bible knew all that. In expressing their love of God they threw their hearts and souls into it, with singing, dancing and with playing all kinds of instruments. They abandoned their bodies and minds to the love of God!

My favourite Psalm is Psalm 150 - because it is inclusive of all the instruments!
(The mood is perfectly captured by Natalie Sleeth in Hymn 245)

Praise the Lord!
Praise God in his sanctuary;
praise him in his mighty firmament!
Praise him for his mighty deeds;
praise him according to his exceeding greatness!

Praise him with trumpet sound;
Praise him with lute and harp!
Praise him with timbrel and dance;
Praise him with strings and pipe!
Praise him with sounding cymbals;
praise him with loud clashing cymbals!

Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!
Praise the Lord!

My life flows on in endless song;
Above earth's lamentation
I hear the sweet though far off hymn
That hails a new creation:
Through all the tumult and the strife
I hear the music ringing;
It finds an echo in my soul
How can I keep from singing?
- Robert Lowry, "How Can I Keep from Singing" Hymn 716, Voices United

All people that on earth do dwell,
Sing to the Lord with cheerful voice.
Him serve with mirth, His praise
 forth tell;
Come ye before Him and rejoice.
- William Kethe, "Old 100th" (Ps. 100)

Whoever sings prays twice.
Attributed to Augustine, quoted in Brian Wren, Praying Twice

Before the message, there must be the vision, before the sermon the hymn,
before the prose the poem.
- Amos N. Wilder, Theopoetic: Theology and the Religious Imagination

The best imagery [for God] is that which is capable of being sung. Next to
silence, that which comes nearest to expressing the inexpressible mystery
is music.
- W. Paul Jones, Teaching the Dead Bird to Sing

My life flows on in endless song;
Above earth's lamentation
I hear the sweet though far off hymn
That hails a new creation:
Through all the tumult and the strife
I hear the music ringing;
It finds an echo in my soul
How can I keep from singing?
- Robert Lowry, "How Can I Keep from Singing"

Remember:

Buy coffee and keep for way back

clarinet and alto - plus holder

water bottle

blade of grass

pill bottles - popping corn

sermon

music - higher ground

bible

hymn book

tape recorder, tape and extension cord