

Sunday June 25, 2023

Lesson 4: Sing to God!

Scripture: Psalm 51; Colossians 3: 16-17

Context:

Today we continue our summer curriculum, “Inspired By God.” In this final lesson of our first unit, “The Rich Literature of the Bible,” we end our study of the various genres in the Bible and how the Old Testament connects to the New Testament. Each week we have seen how God speaks and acts in both the Old Testament and the New Testament, inviting humanity to consider the faithfulness of God from generation to generation. Today we will seek to understand how lyrics and music can be part of our spiritual practice.

The Old Testament passage today comes from the book of Psalms. Psalms is known as one of the richest books of the Old Testament where the marvelous works of God in creation, judgment, salvation, Israel’s story, the law of life, the Holy City and the presence there, the once and future Davidic messiah, warning against wickedness paired with exhortation to righteousness, the majesty and tragedy of the human condition, the everlasting and present and coming kingdom of God – all belong to the agenda of the book of Psalms.¹ These marvelous works stand to testify to God and the psalms were also seen as prescriptive for worship. In ancient times, the book of Psalms was recited and sung in services of worship, both individually and corporately.² The words in the psalms allow readers of any time period to find common themes and show God’s constant presence with humanity.

The psalm for today, Psalm 51, is perhaps the most famous in the book. One of the lines in the psalm is the basic statement to all penitential prayer in the Old Testament, the simple confession: “I have sinned.”³ The focus of the prayer is a petition for God to help and is also a declaration of confession. The superscription identifies the psalm as a prayer made by David after the prophet Nathan confronts him with his sin in the affair with Bathsheba. The prayer later becomes as identified as a corporate penitential prayer seeking cleansing and purification from all transgressions, iniquities, and sins.⁴ Yet the psalm is also a prayer of thanksgiving as there is also a declaration of the beauty of God’s grace, nothing which is earned yet freely given to the sinner. By both justification and sanctification, God redeems and makes the sinner whole.

The New Testament passage comes from the book of Colossians. Written to the church in Colossae, Paul seeks to help the Colossians learn how to live with one another. Part of learning to live with each other is cultivating practices to be with each other. They are to vocally praise

¹ Mays, James L. “Psalms.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2011), 1-2.

² *Ibid.*, 2.

³ *Ibid.*, 197.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 199.

one another and join in singing hymns as a body.⁵ These acts of worship are to inspire Christians as they join together to praise the Lord. This cultivation of worship is also meant to inspire them in their daily lives to be followers of Jesus. Worship takes on its true character when it is viewed as setting the agenda for what Christians do in the world and the spirit in which they fulfill their calling as servants of God.⁶ Living worship is to be a guide for Christians.

Application

I once had a pianist at one of the churches I served repeat the phrase, “Music is the universal language.” Her words ring true. Wherever you go, you will find music. It may be uplifting with beats to inspire dancing. Or it may be more solemn with pacing to emphasize reverence or even mourning. Whatever the intent of the music may be, it speaks to the human soul and tries to communicate something about life.

Thus, it should come as no surprise as to the role of lyrics and music in the Christian tradition. Whether you prefer contemporary or traditional worship, I have come to find the words we sing make a difference in how we see life. And it is not about the singer if it’s a praise band, or about the perfection of the organist. If we pay attention to the words we sing, our hearts will be convicted, challenged, or emboldened.

Both our Old Testament and New Testament passages testify to how God works through music to reach us. Psalm 51 reminds us of how perhaps the easier way to confess our sins is to sing them, using rich analogies to name the truth of ourselves and how we are guilty of transgressing against the Lord and one another. The passage from Colossians 3 reminds us of how music and hymnody can help us to love God and one another better, reminding us of the gift of life to come with being with those around us. Music helps the people of God, whether they are cleaning up after an exile, or figuring out best practices as the early church is formed. By making music as part of spiritual direction, humans can be reminded of the great work God does in our lives.

A few years ago, a colleague once told me about how worship can play a role in how we connect and relate to one another. At one particular Annual Conference (the annual meeting for the body of United Methodist Christians) one of the lay delegates of this clergy colleague told them there was another clergy they would never listen to after watching them during the gathering. When my colleague pressed as to why, the lay delegate explained: “They were never at the various worship gatherings where we heard the Word proclaimed, or received Holy Communion where we said we would forgive each other because of God’s grace for all. They never sang the words in the hymns where we talked about being the servants of or our Lord or praised Jesus just for being our mighty God. And during the business sessions, all they could do was attack others and focus on their own agenda. Their life was not connected to worship.” What an observant individual to point out about how our engagement with worship impacts how we live our lives.

From time to time, especially when I plan worship, I like to read the hymns. Every time I do so, I am struck by the beauty of the words people before me sat down to write and then compose to music. I think about their stories and their struggles, and how they felt so moved by

⁵ Martin, Ralph P. “Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2012), 125.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 126.

God to find a way to express adoration, confession, or thanksgiving to the Lord. For me, it is humbling as I realize God has always been at work in the lives of others and will continue to do so. And God will do the same in my life, as I sing or listen to music connected to our Lord.

Perhaps one of my greatest concerns with trends down ticking in corporate worship attendance is what will happen to us as a people of God in how we are formed. Worship is indeed about praising God and giving thanks for all God has done for us. Yet worship is also formational. As we sing hymns and songs, engaging with both ones we know and ones new to us, we are being formed and positioned for service in this world. The lyrics and music remind us God is still at work in and through us.

Both the Old Testament and New Testament speak to how God is active in our lives through lyrics and music. Psalm 51 reminds us of how God forgives us and cleanses us. Colossians reminds us God wants us to be a thankful people. And God also wants us to watch our words and our actions. God wants a posture of worship to be the story of our lives.

How have you seen lyrics or music change your perspective? Why is worship central to our lives as Christians? What is your favorite hymn or song? How does it connect to your faith? How can we be attentive to music and lyrics as a spiritual discipline?

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