



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to everyone

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“Sing!” Psalms 30, 33 Healing Ministry

Before we begin this morning, I wanted to be sure to let you know how you might help fire victims here in Auburn, so close to us. There's a fire clean-up group forming under leadership from the Southern Baptists through Bell Road Baptist Church. These are the people to contact if you want to get dirty. I don't know the actual schedule. It's hard work, and if you have compromised lung capacity, this is not for you. But take down these numbers, if this is of interest. I have a full sheet of further information at the back of the hall, if you sense this is a way you could be helpful.

Last week I did not really mention that the Bible messages this month and on World Communion Sunday in October explore the acts of worship. Last week, we explored the Sabbath that God commands, so that we have time to worship Him, focusing on Him instead of on work. No other culture but Hebrew/Jewish culture had a command from their God to rest on the last day of the week. It's really a big deal.

There were some things I did not get into last week, such as distortions of the Sabbath that crept in by the time of Jesus, which caused him frequent conflict with the guardians of religious tradition. Nor did I get into the issue of “Why do we worship on Sunday, when Sabbath is clearly the last day of the week, Saturday?” A start of an answer to that is that Christians decided to worship on the First day of the week (Sunday, in the Roman calendar) because that was the day our Lord was raised from death. And resurrection was God's ratification of Jesus' life and his obedience-even-to-death for our sakes. There is nothing more important, for Christians. That's why worship got moved there. This happened after Jews kicked Christians out of the synagogues, sometime late in the First Century.

Anyway, today we're moving on to what is a big part of our worship—music and singing. Singing has always been a part of worship. Sometimes, we get so caught up in the music and the act of singing, the words pass us by. At the close of their morning worship service in one congregation, the pastor stood to read his resignation. It had all the usual complimentary phrases you might expect in such a statement. He then concluded his prepared words by saying, “The same Jesus who led me to you, is now leading me to another church.” He sat down, the minister of music then stepped to the podium and led the congregation in singing, “What A Friend We Have In Jesus.”

One Sunday during the evening service in another church someone noticed their child energetically singing the chorus, “Soon and very soon/we are going to see the King...” Listening closer to their five year old they heard the words, “Soon and very soon / we are going to Burger King.” Music and singing have always been important in worship.

There was a lot of music in the life of the Hebrew slaves, the Israelite citizens, and the scattered Jews around the world. When the Hebrew slaves were freed from Egypt and delivered from Pharaoh's army as they crossed the Red Sea, Moses' sister, Miriam, broke out into song with other women and with musical instruments. Her song - "Miriam's Song" it is called - is probably the oldest piece of literature in the Bible. But there is much more. Scattered through the Old Testament and New Testament are references to music and singing at weddings, at funerals, when the king was enthroned, at the dedication of the Temple, at banquets and feasts, and on and on. The Israelites were known widely for their music, so when the Babylonian Empire conquered Palestine and carried off to Babylon "the best and brightest" of Israel, one of the things the victors demanded was that the Israelites sing them "The Songs of Zion", probably something like our "America the Beautiful" and other patriotic songs we know here. The female singers of Israel were, according to a Greek commentator of Inter-Testamental times, the best in the world. David, the shepherd-boy-who-became-king, sang and played a stringed mini-harp called a lyre, and soothed the rages of King Saul. After David became king and united the tribes of Israel into a nation, he built a palace, and started to employ professional musicians, which included singers.

But we have no direct music or words to all these songs mentioned here and there. What we do have, in the center of our Bibles, is the book of Psalms—the longest book in the Bible. "Psalms" is the "worship songbook" of Israel. It was created over many years for use primarily in the Temple. Open your Bibles to Psalms 4 and 5. . . . Do you see the headings (which the Hebrew Bible counts as "verse one" in each Psalm)? Our translations into English may differ a bit, but one version of Psalm 4 says, "*A psalm by David. Note to the music leader: use stringed instruments.*" Psalm 5 is the same, but gives the direction to "*use flutes*". These musical directions helped the band leader provide the right musical background for the lyrics, which, of course, were sung by one, or by a choir of people.

And as with our popular songs, the lyrics of the Psalms were set in poetry. Poetry, for us, rhymes—you know, "moon, June, spoon, tune, croon" and so on. Hebrew poetry does not rhyme. Instead, Hebrew poetry works by parallel phrases, called "parallelism". Look at Psalm 5. The first verse reads,

Give ear to my words, O Lord,
consider my sighing.

The first line is paralleled by the second line, which builds on it, in what is called synonymous parallelism. Many Psalms and Proverbs have examples of "antithetic parallelism", such as the last verse of Psalm 1, which reads,

For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.

The first phrase makes a statement, but the second phrase speaks to the other side of the same coin--here's what happens to the righteous, here's what happens to the wicked.

There's a lot more we could say about Hebrew poetry, but I want to go back to the music and singing in Israel's worship book. Look again at Psalm 4. Does your version have, at the right-hand side of the text, the word "Selah"? It's not part of the text, proper. It's another of those musical directions for the band. We think it means, "Big Crescendo Here" - "*Cut Loose for a Moment!*" It's a musical exclamation point that aids the emphasis of the text. Look at

Psalm 9. There, a particular tune is to be used to support the singing, a tune everyone in that time knew as, “The Death of the Son”. But look at the lyrics. There is nothing there about the death of a son. So it was a familiar tune, but with words freshly written for that tune. Martin Luther and Charles and John Wesley did this, picking up tunes sung in taverns and writing new words for them, and bringing them into church. “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” is one of those. With a tune from the tavern, ordinary people paid attention; this tune, they knew!

Reading through the Psalms, many of them are for individual use. I can imagine someone coming to the temple, paying a singer and instrumentalists to offer one of these songs that matched the situation or mood of the patron—crying out in pain, or rejoicing in deliverance. But many Psalms are “us” songs, sung by the people of Israel. Some of these were antiphonal psalms, with (say) “the left side” singing one part, and “the right side” singing the following part, alternately – or the music leaders singing one part, and the congregation singing the second part.

I’d like to try that with you, today. Together, let’s do an antiphonal reading of Psalm 33. To keep us on “the same page”, the words will be up here. I’ll say the first phrase of each verse, you say the second phrase of each verse. Let this be a “bonus morning prayer to God” for us. I begin with. . . . [text]

Now, without music, reading out loud like that gets kinda dull, to me. It can become what we call, “sing-song-y”. But put those words to real music, and we’re no longer reading, we’re *singing*! We can let our emotions out; more of our senses are engaged; we have to breathe in more air, and raise our voices in praise! SING! (And this congregation DOES!)

Singing is a “we” thing. We’re all engaged together, when we sing. Music helps carry emotions and rhythm, which are part of our very biology. Martin Luther used to say, “He who sings, prays twice!” Now you understand why. God gets more from us when we sing than when we only speak. Singing together is perhaps our best praise of God, using more of our bodies and our gifts to give God glory.

Our new banners lift up words from a favorite hymn—“Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee”. In the banners by themselves, we get not only the words, we get pictures “which are worth a thousand words” (*which would be hard to fit on there*). But when we SING those words, how much more they come alive!

Want to try something else? When you get home today, turn on the TV and wait for a commercial that has a “jingle” or song in it. Focus on the tune. Hum it a few times. Now, how could you turn that tune into a praise of God?

Remember the old Coca-Cola tune? hum OK, try this:

*We praise You, Lord; we praise You, Lord; we glor-i-fy Your Name.
We bow our heads down to the ground; we honor now your reign.*

*We thank You, Lord; we thank You, Lord; we spread the news around
That You’re our Highest Love, O Lord; we live to make You proud!*

Make God your Highest Love. Take Sabbath with God. Worship. SING!

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California
on September 13, 2009, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]