

“Can music save your mortal soul?”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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Psalm 149

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Do you remember the songs that somehow, when you needed them most, were there for you? I remember sitting on the top bunk of my bed, as a pimply teenager, with my headphones on, with this old thing called a CD player in my lap, lying there for hours, listening to songs that... knew me, like they had crawled into my head and were giving voice to my thoughts and feelings. They told me I wasn't alone. They loved me, challenged me, called me.

What were your songs? (You can share them in the comments. Mine were “I Am a Rock” by Simon and Garfunkel, and “Vincent” by Don McLean, and “A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall” by Bob Dylan... You're like, Wait a second, How old are you?) Many of you last week wrote in the comments that you can't listen to “Here I Am, Lord” without crying.

In today's Psalm, the author says, “Sing to the Lord a new song... Let them praise God's name with dancing, make melody to God with tambourine and lyre... Let them sing for joy.” When the psalmist sings this song, the people of Israel are facing threat from nations that seek to conquer and oppress them. This song is a kind of defiant joy in the face of fear, an affirmation of faith to carry a people along dangerous roads. It is a reminder of who they are and to whom they belong.

In his iconic song “American Pie,” Don McLean sings, “Did you write the book of love, and do you have faith in God above, if the Bible tells you so? Do you believe in rock and roll? Can music save your mortal soul?”

What do you think? Can music save your mortal soul? It's not an easy question.

When our church was debating whether we should pay a bunch of money to restore our organ or not, we wrestled with some hard questions: Is our organ essential to the worship of God? Does it further our mission as a church? Does it bring us closer to God and thus our salvation?

We aren't the first to ask these questions. Did you know that the first Christians sang A cappella? They had no choirs, no musical instruments, because they were too “pagan.” Sorry, choir! Instead, they simply sang together as a congregation, no concerns about how “good” they sounded. Augustine worried that if music was too pretty, it would distract from the object of worship: God. The music of the church continued to evolve dramatically until the Protestant Reformation. Catholics, at the time, rejected much of their secular music; the Council of Trent even considered abolishing music altogether. While Martin Luther embraced music totally, to the point that he created a worship service that was almost entirely music, Ulrich Zwingli eliminated music from worship. John Calvin allowed only the congregational singing of Psalms, as directly from Scripture—no instruments, no choirs, no hymns. The pipe organ that is so traditional to us wasn't always so. It used to be the new radical thing, with secular origins. The City Council of

Zurich went on a rampage and smashed all the scandalous pipe organs in their city. Fast forward to the 20th century and the advent of radio, some Christians like Charles E. Fuller began broadcasting gospel music and evangelism, while other Christians rejected the medium. And the Contemporary Christian Music that grew out of the Jesus Movement of the 1970s is still controversial to this day. Larry Norman sang, “I want the people to know, That He saved my soul, But I still like to listen to the radio... They say that rock and roll is wrong... Why should the devil have all the good music?... ‘Cause Jesus is the Rock, and He rolled my blues away.”

It boils down to this: Is music entertainment or worship? Is it performative or participatory? Does it turn our focus toward ourselves or toward God?

Yet, despite our debates, the church keeps coming back to music. It pulls on us like gravity. Music is there at the creation of the world, “when” (in the words of Job) “the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy” (38:7). And music will be there at the end, in Revelation, when “every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them” will sing to the Lamb on the throne (5:13). Music is one of humanity’s first creations, recorded in the fourth chapter of Genesis. It marks the Exodus and freedom of God’s people, which we’ll read about next week. Singing was part of Israel’s worship in synagogue and temple. The whole Book of Psalms is a record of Jewish songs. Even at the Last Supper, according to Matthew, a hymn was sung. The Apostle Paul says that we should “sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God” (Col. 3:16). Scholar John Leith tells us that, in the 16th and 17th centuries, “French Protestants sang psalms with such vigor as they were led to jail or to the stake that psalm-singing was outlawed.” The first book published in English in North America was the Puritans’ song book of psalms. In the 19th century, the music of camp meetings and revivals converted a largely secular nation.

Theologian Karl Barth writes, “The Christian church sings. It is not a choral society. Its singing is not a concert. But from inner, material necessity it sings. Singing is the highest form of human expression.” Singing is how we learn how to speak about God. Music is theology; it deepens our understanding, confronts us with the holy, immerses us in the mystery that cannot be explained, only experienced. When we sing, our voices unite, different and imperfect as they may be, in the single harmony that is the body of Christ. We listen better, feel deeper, and participate more fully in the worship of God.

When I listened to those songs as a teenager, I felt understood. I felt like maybe I too could be loved. And ironically, even as they comforted me, they drew me out of myself, got me out of bed, to face the world, to live, to have faith. What would we call that except grace?

We have seen music rouse the memories and vitality of people with Alzheimer’s and dementia, because music is stored in a different part of the brain from all other memories. We have witnessed music comfort the grieving during a funeral, or stir a congregation to discipleship, or bless a child at baptism. We have seen music therapy empower children with special needs, and heal trauma, and care for the dying. One music therapist recalls visiting a woman in hospice. At first, she requested Johnny Cash songs. Then the therapist learned that she had led a church choir for 50 years. As they started singing spirituals, the woman said that she was at peace and was not afraid to die. She said she had one last song request: “My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less.” She

repeated the last line—“All other ground is sinking sand”—twice. Two hours later, with a peace that passes understanding, she died.¹

That’s why, after more than a year of study, and many hours of conversation and prayer, our church discerned that our organ is more than a collection of pipes. That organ is funerals and weddings, baptisms and new members, mission and evangelism, justice and love. That organ is a reminder of God’s majesty. It surrounds us with the holy and offers our praise. It may not be essential (very little is, other than people, Scripture, and discipleship), and it’s certainly not the only musical instrument—and we should try others. But that organ is part of our worship and mission. It is how we say thanks.

Maybe music itself can’t save our mortal soul. Only God can. But surely, God can use music to speak to us of salvation. And surely we can use music to speak back. If Christ is God’s incarnational grace, love in the flesh, the Word through whom God creates, then may music be our word back—a duet, a love song, between God and humanity. **Amen.**

¹ musictherapy.org, story told by Edo Banach