

7-25-2021 SOUL SONGS: Lifted High - A Soul Song of Praise

Psalm 145; Luke 10:25-28

First United Methodist Church - Auburn, Indiana

July 25, 2021 - The Reverend Dr. Mark Owen Fenstermacher

For three of my years in college, I lived in a dormitory in Bloomington. There are a lot of stories I could tell you from that time in my life but they're not going to get told here. Now. Or later. (*Honestly, I was a rather boring guy living a rather tame life during my years at IU. So many of my stories wouldn't have you on the edge of your seat but in fact might have you yawning.*)

One part of that time in my life I will tell you about has to do with music. And the varieties of music you would hear if you had been walking down the hallways of Wilkie South with me.

It was, if you know what was happening in the world of music between 1969 and 1973, a time of incredible creativity and excellence in the world of popular music. There was the "British Invasion." There was the poetry of people like Bob Dylan and Joan Baez and James Taylor. Music by black artists like Muddy Waters, Chuck Berry and Little Richard were fueling much of the creative energy of white artists. There was the Motown phenomenon with people like Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye, the Four Tops, Martha and the Vandellas, the Temptations, the Supremes, and more. And, of course, there was the San Francisco world with groups like the Steve Miller Band, Jefferson Airplane, Country Joe McDonald and the Fish, and the Grateful Dead. Finally, there was the harmony of the Beach Boys on the West Coast and groups like Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons on the East Coast.

The point is that there was all this music.

There was all this variety.

I'm thinking of all that music as we continue our series **Soul Songs** because what we find in the Psalms is a stunning variety of songs. (*We'll talk about that variety in just a moment.*) What God gives us in the psalms -some written by David, many written by others over hundreds of years- is a variety of songs, of poetry, that speak to...give voice to...almost every situation in life. I don't they is another book in all of literature that speaks so honestly to the human condition, and so completely expresses what it is like to walk with God.

I'll not pretend to be an expert in the finer points of Hebrew poetry, but it might be helpful for you to know some of the following facts about the psalms.

First, they are generated out of people's experience with God.

When Jesus is hanging on the cross, he cries out -Matthew 27:46 reports- "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Which tells us several things about Jesus...and the psalms: they are honest. We never have to pretend with God. We never have to hide our tears. We never have to hide our anger. We never have to hide our joy. We never have to hide our need.

Jesus hangs on the cross and cries out. Jesus cries out to God and the whole world can hear his need, his sense of abandonment, his sense of desolation.

So when Jesus cries out, we can hear the kind of honest-to-God relationship the psalms invite us to have with God. You see, the words Jesus speaks from the cross when he demands to know why God has abandoned him come from the 22nd Psalm.

Jesus, when he hangs on the cross, where any normal person would be nearly out of their mind with pain and terror, is remembering a psalm that his mommy or daddy might have taught him at night before going to sleep or during prayer time in the morning. Jesus, like many Jewish children, would have been taught the psalms early in life. Over and over and over, they would have heard the songs. Over and over and over, they would have prayed the psalms or sung the psalms.

The psalms, at least a good many of them, would have gotten into Jewish children the way your favorite songs have gotten into you. They become a part of you. And, here is the thing: not only did they carry the psalms with them, this song book of prayers and praise and laments and statements of trust, these songs that rehearse all the good that God has done in the past, *but the songs carried them.*

Favorite psalms, favorite songs, and favorite prayers have a way of carrying us through life. They give us perspective. They give us courage. They help us find meaning in moments that may make no sense otherwise. They remind us who we are and who God is.

“Come, thou fount of every blessing”: the words of the hymn carry me along. *“Tune my heart to sing thy grace; streams of mercy, never ceasing, call for songs of loudest praise.”*

“Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart; naught be all else to me, save that thou art. Thou my best thought, by day or by night, waking or sleeping, thy presence my light.” The words of the hymn carry me. I remember them and God sings to me through them.

“O Love that wilt not let me go, I rest my weary soul in thee; I give thee back the life I owe, that in thine ocean depths its flow may richer, fuller be.” I carry the song with me but the truth is that the song carries me. God speaks to me through the words of the song.

Jesus hangs on the cross, he remembers the 22nd Psalm which would have been shared with him when he was an infant, a child, and it speaks perfectly to what he is feeling...experiencing.

Now, here is the thing: the 22nd psalm begins with the lament, the cry, *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”* but it ends with a shout of confidence in God’s ultimate victory. The last five verses of Psalm 22 say this:

“All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD; and all the families of the nations shall worship him. For dominion belongs to the LORD, and he rules over the nations.

“To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down; before him shall bow all who go down to the dust, and I shall live for him; future generations will be told about the LORD, and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it.”

The psalms are generated out of people’s experience with God, either individually or corporately, and in the cry of Jesus from the cross we hear both an

expression of deep pain and a confidence in God's ultimate victory. It starts with pain and doubt and separation, and the psalm ends with a shout of faith!

So in these songs we come face to face with people's experience with God... whether in life's deepest, darkest valleys or up on the mountain top in the bright light of God's sovereign glory.

Second, the psalms were sometimes used for personal devotion. Even now, when people want to encounter God, they often open the Bible to the psalms. In the middle of the best times of life or in the worst times of life, a verse or two or three of one of the psalms will come to mind.

Psalm 1 begins with a beautiful image: the psalmist says that when we delight in the truth of God, the wisdom of God, the way of God, we are like a tree planted by a stream of water. That plant, the psalmist promises, will bear fruit in every season.

Sometimes, when I am praying, or when I have come face-to-face with a verse or story that speaks to my life in a soul-renewing way, I see myself as a tree planted near a stream that brings life.

My biological father, as he lay dying in Africa, asked people to read the 121st Psalm to him. The psalm begins with these words: *"I lift up my eyes to the hills - from where will my help come? My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth."*

Max was only 27 years old at the time. I wonder when he first heard the words to the psalm. Did he learn the words, the rhythm of it, the truth of it, in Sunday school in Alexandria, Indiana? Or did he find his way to the psalm when he was in the United States Navy in the South Pacific?

Somehow, along the way, he had learned the truth that our help comes from the LORD. So he wanted to hear the words, again. He wanted to hear the truth, again. So the song carried him. And when I open the Bible, and I come to that psalm, not only does the song remind me of the faithfulness of God but the words connect me to my Dad.

The psalms were -and are still now- used for personal devotion. When many of us are hungry for God, or overwhelmed with life, or need to connect with the truth that is like a stream which helps a tree bear fruit in every season, we open the Bible and turn to the Psalms.

Third, not only were the psalms used by individuals during times of worship, of prayer, of praise, of heartbreak, but the psalms were used by the community and nation during great festivals or enthronement ceremonies for kings. Sometimes communal or national songs ended up getting used by individuals to speak to their experience, their journey, and individual psalms were appropriated for national festivals and religious events.

Isn't it amazing how the words of the brilliant, young, African-American poet Amanda have become a part of us. Her poem, "The Hill We Climb", said something to us and something for us. It was a national moment, used during a civic celebration, a national gathering, and yet for many of us this poem also speaks for us about our individual journey.

*When day comes we ask ourselves,
where can we find light in this never-ending shade?
The loss we carry,
a sea we must wade.
We've braved the belly of the beast,
We've learned that quiet isn't always peace...*

*And yet the dawn is ours
before we knew it.
Somehow we do it.
Somehow we've weathered and witnessed
a nation that isn't broken,
but simply unfinished.
We the successors of a country and a time
where a skinny Black girl
descended from slaves and raised by a single mother
can dream of becoming president
only to find herself reciting for one.*

*And yes we are far from polished.
Far from pristine.
But that doesn't mean we are
striving to form a union that is perfect.
We are striving to forge a union with purpose,
to compose a country committed to all cultures, colors, characters and
conditions of man.*

*And so we lift our gazes not to what stands between us,
but what stands before us.
We close the divide because we know, to put our future first,
we must first put our differences aside.
We lay down our arms
so we can reach out our arms
to one another.*

A national song can speak for the nation...to the nation. And then, sometimes, that national song or psalm becomes our song...it speaks to our soul, our journey, our yearning for some new day. The song for the many becomes *our* song.

Fourth, the Psalms are breath-takingly honest. We spoke about that several months ago as we explored what we say to God when we're in the wilderness. Christians tend to often think God will be offended by our honesty, our anger, our tears, our outrage at God's apparent absence in the face of injustice, but the psalms give us permission to be honest with God...honest to God. We don't need to hide who we are or what we are thinking or what we are feeling from God.

Some people are offended by the emotions and thoughts in some of the Psalms. To be honest, I am also shocked...I read things that take my breath away when a psalm turns into a cry for vengeance. But even if my mild sensibilities are offended by

the humanity we find in the Psalms, I am grateful we have a God who invites us to be honest and fully present with God...fully real.

Fifth, the Psalms are poetry. Which means reading them with inflexible literalism guarantees that we will miss much of what they are trying to tell us about God, about life, about faith, about love. Poetry has a way of saying things, deep things, that prose may not be able to communicate. And, certainly, poetic images are often more easy to remember than prose.

When Psalm 100 announces that we are the sheep of God's pasture, the writer isn't saying we are sheep but the writer is using a poetic image. To help us see how helpless we are, how vulnerable we are, and how we need a God who will look out for us...and understand we may not be the brightest animal on the farm.

When the writer of Psalm 114 says that the "*mountains skipped like rams, the hills like lambs*", the psalmist isn't being literal. The psalmist isn't telling us the mountains began imitating rams or lambs when the God's people escaped Egyptian slavery and went out to freedom, but the poet is using an image to describe a joy that was so deep, so complete, so transcendent that even creation hums when those in slavery to governments or economic powers or addictions or fears are set free by the living God.

Read the Psalms with the mind of a poet, or you will miss much of the truth these songs have for you about God and faith and life and love and justice.

Sixth, the Psalms are filled with a variety of songs. The way you would have heard all sorts of songs if you had walked down the hallway with me at Wilkie South.

There are wisdom psalms that talk about the liberating power of God's laws and truth. Psalm 1 is a wisdom psalm as is Psalm 119. The writer talks about the beauty of the decrees of God. Which may not make sense to you unless you have lived through a time when nothing made sense, and all your human answers to life just made things worse.

There are songs of praise. Our psalm today, Psalm 145, is a song of praise.

There are songs of trust and confidence in God.

There are enthronement psalms used to celebrate the crowning of a new king, and there are psalms used to celebrate the beginning of a new year.

There are songs of lament. Which is often a shock for those who think there isn't a place in worship, in the church, for grief, for tears, for sadness.

There are songs about the beauty of Zion, about the beauty of Jerusalem and the Temple. I remember reading a note by one of the grandchildren about the family cottage at Lake Webster. The note began to describe what it was like, as a child, to see the light coming through the windows, to hear the sounds coming in off the lake, and to smell the wood of the buildings of Epworth Forest. In the note, the grandchild described the breeze coming off the lake which always seems to welcome those who step out of a hot car. The grandchild talked about the kitchen and the taste of the water and the sounds of the voices as the members of the Owen family moved around and called to one another. "You have a sound," the grandchild said. "You Owens have a sound to you." The note turned into a poem describing, and celebrating, a holy place... that has had a way of healing the weary hearts of multiple generations of our family.

So we find psalms or songs that talk about the beauty of Jerusalem, the beauty of the Temple, the beauty of Zion.

++++

Before we are done this morning, let's turn for just a few minutes to Psalm 145. The psalm is a psalm of praise.

A psalm of thanksgiving is all about how we have been blessed.

A psalm of praise is -generally- all about who God is.

If you have your Bible with you, look with me at Psalm 145 (NRSV).

1

*I will extol you, my God and King,
and bless your name forever and ever.*

2

*Every day I will bless you,
and praise your name forever and ever.*

3

*Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised;
his greatness is unsearchable.*

The psalmist has made a decision: God will be his God. God will be his King. This is a profound life decision. It is a declaration of the deepest allegiance of the heart and soul of the psalmist.

The psalmist will praise God. Not because the LORD God YHWH is an insecure deity who demands our praise, but because is appropriate given who God is.

4

*One generation shall laud your works to another,
and shall declare your mighty acts.*

5

*On the glorious splendor of your majesty,
and on your wondrous works, I will meditate.*

6

*The might of your awesome deeds shall be proclaimed,
and I will declare your greatness.*

In verses 4, 5 and 6 the psalmist begins to talk about the mighty acts of God. The psalmist, in his song of praise, begins to talk about the "glorious splendor" of God's majesty.

I hear those words and I think of the moon and the stars.

I hear those words and I think of the wonder of creation.

I hear those words and I think of God's decision to choose a nomadic tribe, a nomadic collection of nobodies, as his servant people.

I hear those words and I think of God's ability to bring Abraham and Sarah through what God brought them through, and I think of God's ability to get the attention of a fugitive shepherd and speak to him out of a burning bush, and I think of God's ability to take a ragged band of ex-slaves and turn them into a people who were -in their better moments- free and who cared about the widow, the orphan, the stranger in their midst, and justice.

I hear those words about the greatness of God, the glorious splendor of God's majesty, and I think of stars, of orbiting planets, of the sea parting as the Hebrews escaped the Egyptian army, of God speaking to Moses, of God bringing his people back home after more than fifty years in Babylonian exile.

But the psalmist is praising God for something else. The next few verses tell us what has the psalmist singing, what has the psalmist on his feet, clapping his hands in praise and wonder, singing like some early Methodist who is so in love with God that she or he has lost all sense of decorum and restraint: it is the love of God that is in fact the righteousness of God. It is the love of God, the abundant goodness of God, that has the psalmist singing aloud about the righteousness of God.

7

*They shall celebrate the fame of your abundant goodness,
and shall sing aloud of your righteousness.*

8

*The Lord is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*

9

*The Lord is good to all,
and his compassion is over all that he has made.*

10

*All your works shall give thanks to you, O Lord,
and all your faithful shall bless you.*

Then, the psalmist begins singing about the everlasting kingdom of God. This kingdom has "*dominion*" and it "*endures throughout all generations.*" Over and over again, in these next verses, the psalmist stresses the splendor of God's kingdom, the dominion of God's everlasting kingdom, and what the psalmist is singing to us is that God's love has the first word and God's love has the last word.

Over creation.

Over the people we love and the people we hate.

Over us.

In Romans 8, the Christian missionary pastor named Paul declares that there is nothing in all creation, nothing that has happened and nothing that can happen, which can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

There is no boundary to this kingdom of love.

There is no boundary to this kingdom of grace.

There is no boundary to this splendor of the God who chooses love as God's righteousness.

There is no boundary to the glory of this God who chooses to love.

11

*They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom,
and tell of your power,*

12

*to make known to all people your[a] mighty deeds,
and the glorious splendor of your[b] kingdom.*

13

*Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,
and your dominion endures throughout all generations.
The Lord is faithful in all his words,
and gracious in all his deeds.[c]*

Then, the psalmist speaks about how God cares for the people God loves. God holds up those those are falling. *(That's a good thing to remember when you mess up so badly you can't bear to see your own face in a mirror!)*

God raises up all those who are bowed down. Which makes me think of the invitation Jesus gives all of us in Matthew 11:28 (NIV): *"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."* The eternal, boundless love of God holds up those who can stand on their own two feet. The eternal, boundless love of God raises up those who are bowed down...by the weight of failure, by an addiction, by shame, by loneliness. The eternal boundless love of God provides what we need, and God always comes to us with an open hand.

14

*The Lord upholds all who are falling,
and raises up all who are bowed down.*

15

*The eyes of all look to you,
and you give them their food in due season.*

16

*You open your hand,
satisfying the desire of every living thing.*

17

*The Lord is just in all his ways,
and kind in all his doings.*

18

*The Lord is near to all who call on him,
to all who call on him in truth.*

19

*He fulfills the desire of all who fear him;
he also hears their cry, and saves them.*

Then, near the end of the psalm, the psalmist points out what we know to be true: those who turn their back on love, those who give up on the way of love, those

who embrace the false gods of vengeance and hate and fear and greed destroy themselves.

20

*The Lord watches over all who love him,
but all the wicked he will destroy.*

This isn't where the song ends. No, the psalmist comes back and in the last verse declares that his song will be...always...about praise.

21

*My mouth will speak the praise of the Lord,
and all flesh will bless his holy name forever and ever.*

C.S. Lewis, in his small book on the Psalms, talks about how we praise God not because praise is expected or demanded but because we have our eyes open to see the beauty of God...the goodness of God.

Our eyes are open.

Our hearts are open.

Our minds are open.

And we notice the beauty and goodness of God.

My eyes are open to the stars.

My ears are open to the whisper of the surf.

My mind is open to the glory of time and the truth of God.

My soul is open to the song sung long ago by another life who had come face to face with the splendor of God's majesty in the splendor of a love beyond knowing.

We notice.

We see.

And so we praise.

I see him in a manger.

I see him stepping down into the water of the Jordan River.

I see him welcoming the children.

I see him inviting all sorts of people, those you would expect him to invite and those you would expect him to avoid at all costs, saying, "Come, follow me."

I see him noticing the hungry crowds and feeding them.

I see him going out early in the morning to a lonely, quiet place to pray.

I see him talking with a Samaritan at a well, in the middle of the day, when no one else is talking with her.

I see him washing the feet of those who will betray him, those who will deny him, and those who will slip away when the angry crowd turns into a mob.

I see him dying with a love for the world that is undiminished.

I see him standing in the garden, early in the morning, and I know that the splendor of his majesty...is undimmed. And his dominion is forever.

And so I praise.

John Wesley, the founder of the renewal movement known as Methodism, gave the members of his bands, the small groups and societies, instructions for singing. You can find these in the beginning of the United Methodist Hymnal.

There are seven points of instruction and the fifth is that Methodists should “Sing modestly. Do not bawl, so as to be heard above or distinct from the rest of the congregation, that you may not destroy the harmony, but strive to unite your voices together, so as to make one clear melodious sound.”

John may have been a little sharp with some of his early Methodist brothers and sisters, I think. He tended to be a very serious, rather rigid little man whose preaching set people’s hearts on fire with a love for God. But I think the enthusiasm of those early Methodists could have been a beautiful thing. Maybe they were a little loud. Maybe they were a little out of control. Maybe they shocked the neighboring congregations whose expressions of worship and praise were more subdued. The early Methodists, many thought, needed to be domesticated. Reigned in a bit.

Here is the thing: maybe those early Methodists saw the splendor of God’s love on the cross and couldn’t help themselves: they got loud. They got carried away. They could not resist saying to the world, “Do you see that? Do you see him? Do you see the beauty and majestic splendor of that love which knows no boundaries?”

Frederick Buechner wrote about praise, and this is -in part- what he has to say to us:

...praising God...is about as measured as a volcanic eruption, and there is no implication that under any conceivable circumstances it could be anything other than what it is. The whole of creation is in on the act: the sun and moon, the sea, fire and snow, Holstein cows and white-throated sparrows, old men in walkers and children who still haven't taken their first step. Their praise is not chiefly a matter of saying anything, because most of creation doesn't deal in words. Instead, the snow whirls, the fire roars, the Holstein bellows, the old man watches the moon rise. Their praise is not something that at their most complimentary they say, but something that at their truest they are.

We learn to praise God not by paying compliments, but by paying attention. Watch how the trees exult when the wind is in them. Mark the utter stillness of the great blue heron in the swamp. Listen to the sound of the rain. Learn how to say "Hallelujah" from the ones who say it right.

First, we open our eyes. Then, when we see the splendor, the majesty of this love, the praise pours out of us...the way the trees exult when the wind is in them.