



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Westminster Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, TN
June 30, 2024
The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
Sermon: "The Joyful Noise"

Psalm 98 (NRSVUE)

O sing to the Lord a new song,
for he has done marvelous things.
His right hand and his holy arm
have gotten him victory.
The Lord has made known his victory;
he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations.
He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness
to the house of Israel.
All the ends of the earth have seen
the victory of our God.
Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth;
break forth into joyous song and sing praises.
Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre,
with the lyre and the sound of melody.
With trumpets and the sound of the horn
make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord.
Let the sea roar and all that fills it,
the world and those who live in it.
Let the floods clap their hands;
let the hills sing together for joy
at the presence of the Lord, for he is coming
to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness
and the peoples with equity.

The Joyful Noise

Music is a vehicle for feelings, deeper than words.

An example: this week, I rediscovered the late 90s alternative rock band Incubus.
Any Incubus fans in the congregation today?
(I didn't think so.)

That might be an obscure reference in this crowd, but let me say, if you happened to have been an angst-ridden teenage boy in Eastern North Carolina in the late 90s, Incubus was near and dear to your heart.

Scrolling through Spotify this week, I came upon their second album, which was released in 1999, when I was 16 years old. I had completely forgotten that album existed, but listening to it this week, I realize, I know every single song on it. I've been singing it all week in the car.

Listening to it louder than I should, I'm transported back to my teenage self, and the feeling of freedom: driving, windows down, music blaring, 16 years old.

That is, until I happen to look in the mirror. And there's an 8-year-old and a 4-year-old giving their 41-year-old father a quizzical look in the backseat.

So, I turn around to them. "Hey, do you know daddy used to have this cd when he was a just a kid?"

To which they respond, "What's a cd?"

To which I responded, "Never mind, you're ruining it."

To which they respond, 'Can we turn it back to Taylor Swift?'

To which I say, 'No, we're done with Taylor Swift today!'

Music is a vehicle for feelings, deeper than words.

I heard an interview this week with the actor Rainn Wilson, whom some of you might know played the character Dwight on the sitcom *The Office*. In more recent years, Rainn Wilson has become more of a spiritual seeker, a member of the Baha'i faith and the author of books with titles like *Soul Boom: Why We Need a Spiritual Revolution*.¹

In the interview, Wilson is talking about his father. You see, Wilson's grandmother, his father's mother, died of tuberculosis when his father was just a child.

Especially, back in those days, that was a traumatic way to die. People were often sent away to institutions, where they were cut off from the rest of society to pass away from a disease that had no cure.

¹ *Everything Happens with Kate Bowler*, "Rainn Wilson: Brave, Beautiful, and Good Things." Season 12, Episode 11. <https://katebowler.com/podcasts/brave-beautiful-and-good-things/>

Rainn Wilson's father lost his mother early on, in this tragic way. And the one thing she had left him was her collection of classical music.

Fast forward to when his father grew up. He's living this bohemian existence in the 1960s in Nicaragua, working as a disk jockey for AM radio.

Fun fact: do you know what was the most popular music of 1960s Nicaragua? You'd never guess it; it was American Country music. It was all the rage then and there.

So, Rainn Wilson's father is a disk jockey for a Country music station in Nicaragua in the 1960s, but he refuses to play only country. As much as he could, he would sneak in Chopin, Liszt, Beethoven - beautiful classical music, bringing it in wherever he could find space.

And the interviewer asked Wilson, why his dad insisted on playing classical music on a Nicaraguan country station in the 1960s? And he answered, because it was his father's solace; it was his connection; it was his way of expressing his love for the mother he had lost.

And the interviewer responded. I love how she put it. She said: *There's just something so wild about the way...we carry our loves for each other. Sometimes you've just got to play that song.*

Music is a vehicle for feelings, deeper than words.

The Hebrew poets knew this about music.
Just look at today's Psalm.

*O sing to the Lord a new song,
for God has done marvelous things.
His right hand and his holy arm have [gained] him victory.*

Scholars overwhelmingly believe this section of the Psalter to come from the end of the Babylonian exile. The people are faced with the prospect of returning home, after a generation in a foreign land. These are Psalms of God's victory.

A new song is to be sung – a new way of being God's people.
And they are called to celebrate.
In fact, not just the people, the whole creation:

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.

One can't help but wonder though, in the midst of this full-throated call to celebration, this call to sing a new song, if there wasn't some uncertainty.

The people celebrated!

They were called to come home!

But, what home were they returning to? They could leave this foreign land. This land where they had been held captive. And yet, this was the only home many of them had ever known. Celebration, and uncertainty.

There's even hints of that uncertainty, here in the text.

[God's] right hand and [God's] holy arm have [gained] him victory.

For the Israelites of the Babylonian captivity, those words would have brought to mind, another crucial part of their sacred story: It's a call-back to God's deliverance of the people from slavery in Egypt, where *[God's] right hand and [God's] holy arm* figure prominently.

Remember this day in which you came out from Egypt, out of the house of slavery, for by a strong hand the LORD brought you out from this place.

That's Moses to the people in Exodus

The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.

That's Moses to the people in Deuteronomy

The God of this people Israel chose our ancestors and made the people great during their stay in the land of Egypt, and with uplifted arm God led them out of it.

That's Paul, teaching the Gentiles the story of God's deliverance, in the book of Acts.

[God's] right hand and [God's] holy arm are poignant images of how God delivered the people from slavery.

In fact, they appear in the earliest songs of this people. Right after the people crossed the Red Sea, and right after the walls of the sea collapsed and swallowed up Pharaoh's army, Moses and his sister Miriam sing a song in Exodus. Scholars believe it is one of the earliest pieces of Scripture ever written down:

I will sing to the Lord, for God has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea... Your right hand, O Lord, glorious in power – your right hand, O Lord, shattered the enemy.

So, when they sing in Psalm 98, of God's right hand and holy arm, it's not just random words of praise. It's a reminder, that the God who leads them now out of the Babylonian exile, in triumph but also uncertainty, is the same God who led their ancestors out of slavery. And so, they can trust, this is a God of righteousness and equity.

You see, for our ancestors of the faith, music was a vehicle of feeling, and of faith, even deeper than the words on the page.

Centuries later, Mary the mother of Jesus, recalled these images and rooted herself in the faith of her ancestors, when the angel told her she would give birth to the savior.

Mary sang,

*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior. [For] God has shown strength **with his arm**; God has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lonely.*

Mary, an unwed expectant mother, living under patriarchy, living under empire, sang that same song of faith, sang of God's *[God's] right hand and [God's] holy arm*, shoring up her trust in a God of righteousness and equity, in a time of celebration, in a time of uncertainty.

You have to wonder, if the songs of Miriam and Moses, the Psalms of the exile, the songs of her people, who sang in faith through the centuries, in the midst of their peril, in the midst of uncertainty, - you have to wonder, if those songs stirred in her heart, as she sang her new song: *My soul magnifies the Lord.*

You see, the music, is deeper than words.

Underneath what you see on the page, there is a trust, rooted in a sacred memory, of a God revealed to be with and for this people, a God with and for all people:

- The God who sets slaves free and brings home exiles,

- The God who lifts high the poor and sends the greedy away empty.
- The God of righteousness and equity.

That memory spans the generations and centuries.
It is passed down, from our ancestors of the faith.

So, in our moments of celebration, and our moments of uncertainty, we have this tradition available to us – a faith that is not just spoken but sung, carried in a music that reaches down, into the very depths your soul, and holds us up, as it held them up, the writers of our sacred scriptures, and our sacred songs.

Today, as we find ourselves in a well-earned time of celebration.
Celebrating and giving thanks for a career, longer than some of our lifetimes, a career of service, of love, and joy.

And because of that, precisely because we celebrate, we also find ourselves in a space of unknowing. There is a bittersweet quality to today. As we give thanks for what has been, we can't help but ask, what will be?

Where is God calling Peter next?
Where is God calling our church, in the days, months, and years to follow?

But that's the gift of this Psalm. That's the gift of the tradition of music at the heart of Christian worship: we do not need to answer those questions today. In fact, we don't even need words here. Words fail to grasp the beauty and the complexity of a day like today. Words fail to articulate all that Peter Van Eenam has meant to Westminster Presbyterian Church, of Knoxville.

What we need, instead of words, is trust, trust in the God who accompanies today and in the days to follow.

What we need, is music.

We need the songs of faith.

Songs of celebration.

Songs of assurance.

The music that carried our ancestors of the faith, that is the tradition that carries us now.

So let us sing, of God's right hand and strong arm. The God who asks us to sing a new song, not to forget who we are, but precisely so that we will remember: who

we have been, and most of all, who God is, the God who carries us, into a bright and faithful future.

Let us sing new song.

Let us make a joyful noise.

Let us carry on the tradition of faith and thanksgiving.

And as we do, let us give thanks,

For the music,

For the people who have led us,

For the celebration of what has been,

And for the promise of what will be,

Let us give thanks to God. Amen.