

Music as Spiritual Practice: Lessons from David

Music Sunday

I Samuel 16:14-23

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Rev. Cynthia Cochran-Carney, First Presbyterian Church, San Rafael, CA

In the Hebrew Scriptures, we read about David. David had many roles. Shepherd, slayer of Goliath the Philistine giant and eventually King of Israel. He was a great warrior and leader. But I want to lift up one very important aspect of his life, his vocation, his calling from God. David was a musician. He played the harp. He was a songwriter, a poet, a dancer and singer. Over 70 of the Psalms are attributed to him. He wrote Psalm 23. He was a shepherd and he wrote with great conviction that God is like a shepherd.

What does David teach us about music and faith?

David was God's instrument and he brought healing through music.

God used to David and David's music to further the Divine vision of a covenant with the people and all creation. To show God's power over evil. To bring healing to a tormented soul. Listen to passage from I Samuel. David, a shepherd boy and young musician comes to King Saul.

***14** Now the spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him. **15** And Saul's servants said to him, "See now, an evil spirit is tormenting you. **16** Let our Lord now command the servants who attend you to look for someone who is skillful in playing the harp; and when the evil spirit is upon you, he will play it, and you will feel better."*

***17** So Saul said to his servants, "Provide for me someone who can play well, and bring him to me." **18** One of the young men answered, "I have seen a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite who is skillful in playing, a man of valor, a warrior, prudent in speech, and a man of good presence; and the Lord is with him."*

***19** So Saul sent messengers to Jesse, and said, "Send me your son David who is with the sheep." **20** Jesse took a donkey loaded with bread, a skin of wine, and a young goat, and sent them by his son David to Saul. **21** And David came to Saul, and entered his service. Saul loved him greatly, and he became his armor-bearer. **22** Saul sent to Jesse, saying, "Let David remain in my service, for he has found favor in my sight." **23** And whenever the evil spirit came upon Saul, David took the harp and played it with his hand, and Saul would be relieved and feel better, and the evil spirit would depart from him. *I Samuel 16:14 – 23 David plays for Saul**

Think of times God has brought you hope and comfort and peace through music. Sometimes our minds or souls or bodies are troubled or in pain. Listening to music or making music can bring peace and healing.

David teaches us to experience joy and to let loose, to sing, praise God and dance with abandon.

In II Samuel we read about David becoming King of the northern tribes of Israel. Jerusalem was made the capital of the kingdom. The final action to secure this was to bring the chief symbol of the Hebrew people, the people of the covenant with Yahweh. And that was the Ark of the Covenant, the sacred container of the tablets with the Ten Commandments. The ark of God marked the presence of God and it had been under control of the Philistines. Now David has secured it and brought it back. Here is part of the description from 2 Samuel.

*1 David again gathered all the chosen men of Israel, thirty thousand. 2 David and all the people with him set out and went from Baale-judah, to bring up from there the ark of God,.....
5 David and all the house of Israel were dancing before the Lord with all their might, with songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and cymbals. 2 Samuel 6:1-5*

Think of times you have sung or been with people where music moved your soul you clapped or moved your body or tapped your foot – think of weddings or parties when dancing for joy could not be contained.

David uses metaphors in his songs of praise as an invitation to trust God and give courage and hope. David spoke to the Lord the words of this song on the day when the Lord delivered him from the hand of all his enemies, and from the hand of Saul. Psalm 18 was a song.

2 The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer, 3 my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold and my refuge, my savior; you save me from violence. 4 I call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised, and I am saved from my enemies.
II Samuel 22: 1-51 (also Psalm 18)

Through his music, David was God's instrument, offering healing, inviting people to embody joy and feel God's presence giving them courage and strength with a rock-solid foundation.

I am so grateful for the ministry of music at our church. It is one of our strengths. It is one of our sails. We are community and place for music and for young musicians. But I know this is not the only place we enjoy inspiring and soul stirring music. How else is music part of our lives and what can our experiences of listening to and making music tell us about our humanity and our spiritual seeking?

I read a book a few years ago that attempted to answer that question. It is one of those books that has stayed with me. *A Song to Sing, A Life to Live: Reflections on Music as Spiritual Practice* by Don Saliers and Emily Saliers. Don is a church organist, composer and professor of church music. His daughter Emily is part of the Indigo Girls, a folk-rock duo known for their vibrant music and social activism. In the book, Don and Emily help us to see the connections

between Saturday night music and Sunday morning music by exploring the spiritual dimensions of music itself. They help us appreciate the joy of music and how music carries us into the places of sorrow, where we must go if we are to live with honesty about ourselves and others.

Their shared passion for justice leads them across boundaries of nation and culture to embrace music born in experiences of suffering, resistance, and celebration throughout the world. And again and again, they invite us to accompany them across these and other boundaries, remembering the songs of our own lives and finding the courage to join wholeheartedly in the songs of an ever-expanding human community.

One of my favorite quotes - Music thrives in the space created by the tension between what we can imagine and what we can put into words, in the vibrant space of possibility that exists in the gap between our longings and our present reality.

In a time when music is often reduced to advertising jingles, those who listen in churches or synagogues and in bars or concert halls need life-giving alternatives. In the aftermath of a century in which triumphalist human regimes have used music for nationalist and racist purposes, we need music that reveals ways of justice and freedom. In a time when religious communities often settle for too little, we need the full breadth of praise, lament, wonder, and hope, of truth and grateful openness to the divine in the notes and the words.

The French writer and mystic Simone Weil wrote of how we most often obtain what is most precious not by aggressively going out in search of it but by waiting with attentiveness. Don and Emily believe that if we practice attentiveness with open ears and open hearts, we may hear the divine voice calling to us through music on Saturday night as well as Sunday morning. Listening in this way, we also hear the cries and whispers of suffering and the protests of the justice bearers. It opens us to what is most real in humanity's suffering and glory, and in the mystery of the God who is searching for us, calling to us, a source of life and hope deeper than we can conceive.

Whether we are singing a favorite hymn, a Taize chant, a contemporary song or something new to you, it may be helping someone sitting next to you experience God's presence.

Listen, and sing. When you find yourselves being found by the music, tell a friend. Begin with the music you already cherish but live with openness to the possibility that music you have not yet heard will lead you deeply into the mystery at the heart of all that is. May music be a wellspring from which you will drink courage and joy. As you awaken to your deepest longings, may you hear in some unexpected music that God is seeking you and dwelling in you.

Don Saliers & Emily Saliers. *Song to Sing, a Life to Live: Reflections on Music as Spiritual Practice*. Jossey Bass, 2005