

## Songs For the Soul

1 Samuel 16:14-23

February 11, 2024 Mardi Gras Jazz Sunday

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*14 Now the spirit of the Holy One departed from Saul, and an evil spirit 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 lyre; 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 kid, 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 lyre and played it with his hand, and Saul would be relieved and feel better, and the evil spirit would depart from him.*

Jazz in worship. Maybe we should do this a little more often. I am one pastor who loves music and who has felt God's presence and the strength to walk the journey of faith through a wide range of music. When my soul and mind are restless, I often turn to music to draw me close to God, the Holy One and to other people. So I will try my best not to get in the way of the music this morning.

How does God call us to life, to a deeper life and life of compassion? We are invited to listen for the melody that reminds us of who we are – beloved. We are loved. We are created in God's image. God shows us who we are to be and how we are to live as we follow the ways of Jesus. We have a purpose. This gives us our basic melody.

Today we are hearing melodies in jazz, a uniquely American form of music born from the reality and suffering of African American people who were enslaved and working on plantations. When they were living as enslaved people and working in cotton fields, music was one way to survive and feel a different reality. They heard the words of the Bible. People began to clap their hands or tap their feet. The words and hopes became the music of their lives. Calling to each other in the fields. I have much to learn and unlearn about this history. The *Black Church: This is Our Story, This is Our Song* By Henry Louis Gates, Jr., a book and documentary, has helped me learn so much. And now his new series "Gospel."

Jazz and gospel music and African American spirituals are woven into the church, the Black church and I would venture to say most Christian churches in some way. At the end of the service, we will be hearing and singing "When the Saints Go Marching In." It is well-known as a jazz classic. There is melodic improvisation and the second-line New Orleans style. This arrangement often begins with a slow funeral-like march then breaks into a spirited swing.

There are familiar songs and hymns that may vary by region in our country and type of church. There is a hope that hymns and songs in different styles, played on piano or organ or guitar can help express and experience that words alone cannot. Our joys and our sorrows.

The story this morning about Saul consoled by the music of David is a story I can understand. How about you? Its truth reaches me not merely with the brain in my head, but with the heart in my chest. There are some particular spirituals that move me, like this one.

**"There is a balm in Gilead that makes the wounded whole,  
There is a balm in Gilead that heals the sinsick soul."**

When I hear it, something happens to me. I know those words, but whenever I hear them, I feel it again. In particular I remember hearing them sung by a choir at the Martin Luther King ecumenical service in Scotch Plains, NJ. Rev. Dr. Kelmo Porter was the pastor of the Baptist Church. He knew Dr. King. He had marched with Dr. King. There had been some recent racist incidents at the local high school. We had come together as a community to recommit to the Beloved Community and work of anti-racism. I had been feeling fractured. That song seemed to sweep up all the shards of the past weeks. The music put me back together.

Oh, I can understand the story of David and Saul. I can understand how David consoles King Saul by strumming on a stringed instrument. It doesn't ever say he sang to the king. But three times we hear that he was skillful in playing his instrument. And that was enough.

Tradition tells us that David liked to compose songs. The tradition built enough momentum among the pious people that when editors collected the psalms, they assigned the authorship of 80 psalms to David.

Seems old Saul was tormented by some force beyond his control. His advisors said it was an evil spirit. And then they bowed dutifully and affirmed that God is the maker of all things. Maybe the king has a clinical depression. Maybe like some of the prophets, he didn't think he was up for the job. Maybe he was just worn down from having to be in charge all the time. All we know is that he was down, and he was feeling pretty blue.

So he took the advice of his advisors, and sent for a musician to play a sweet song to lift his spirits. Probably it was a song that went something like this . . .

(\* soprano sax plays reprise of "There is a Balm in Gilead")

It is a slippery business to perform music without words, because you turn people loose to whatever else is going on in their hearts. And you give God the freedom to work in the crevasses of their lives.

The great theologian Karl Barth wrote about the music of Mozart. "Mozart does not wish to say anything," he noted, "..... He does not force anything on the listener, does not demand that he or she make any decisions or take any positions; he simply leaves the listener free."

The kind of lives most of us live leave us torn in different directions. A day's work can take us apart. Health challenges, relationships feeling tense, financial challenges, fears about ongoing wars and violence, climate change. So much pulling us in different directions. So many voices clamor for our attention. It is so easy to get dragged down by the business of living that we mute the joy that makes life worth living.

But a good tune can chase away the evil spirits and put us back together, the way we were intended to be. I'm talking about a song that sounds like this . . .

(\* soprano sax plays reprise of "There is a Balm in Gilead")

Just one note,  
just one chord,  
just one sound in harmony with our souls,  
and we know we are met and we are not alone.

You know, I spend much of my own time reading heavy books, studying the Bible, trying to find words to talk about the Word of God. But I am often reminded of how musicians and singers and artists and poets move me, move us, inspire us with the Spirit. Musicians can be brokers of transformation. They get to touch peoples' hearts just by playing the best they can and pouring themselves into their music.

When you play something on an instrument, you have no idea what kind of effect it will have on people, much less on yourself. And the great thing about being a musician or any other kind of artist is that you can dedicate your gift to God as a healing art. Your workspace can become holy ground.

A friend Bill Carter is a jazz pianist, composer and Presbyterian pastor in Clarks Summit, PA. He has a jazz band. He writes.

*As some of you know, our quartet gets around a good bit. I like to take a week of vacation from the church, and then we might play in seven churches in seven days. Sometimes something happens, and it catches me by surprise.*

*We were playing in London, Ohio on a Monday night. A man drove out to hear us. He was a newspaper editor in Columbus. At intermission, he came up and said, "That third song you played, it did something to me. I can't even find the words to express what happened." I never thought he would be at a loss for words.*

*I stood in astonished wonder, grateful that, somehow in the economy of God, the musical art can be a healing art. When you offer the music you have received as a gift, the Spirit of God can work to give life back to people.*

We need all kinds of music in our lives. Joyful hopeful hymns on the organ. Beautiful melodies and songs on the piano. And we need laments. There is so much on our hearts these days. I feel it in my body and my mind and soul. Sometimes we weep. And we need music to sooth and inspire. To be still and ponder and also to move us to live fully, noticing beauty and take action in the direction of healing, wholeness, shalom.

Close with one of my favorite stories about music and the power of the Spirit. One of my favorite writers is Anne LaMott. She had a very difficult childhood and had struggled with drug and alcohol addictions. In her book *Traveling Mercies*, she describes a moment when music in a church drew her back to God and she began her journey of faith. A key moment takes place as she visits a flea market near Sausalito.

*If I happened to be there between eleven and one on Sundays, I could hear gospel music coming from a church right across the street. It was called St. Andrew Presbyterian, and it looked homely and impoverished, a ramshackle building with a cross on top, sitting on a small parcel of land with a few skinny pine trees. But the music wafting out was so pretty that I would stop and listen. I knew a lot of the hymns from the times I'd gone to church with my grandparents and from albums we'd had spirituals. Finally, I began stopping in a St. Andrew's from time to time, standing in the doorway to listen to the songs. I couldn't believe how run down it was, with terrible linoleum that was brown and over shined, and plastic stained-glass windows. But it had a choir of five black women and one rather Amish looking man making all that glorious noise and a congregation of thirty people or so, radiating kindness and warmth. During the time when people hugged and greeted each other, various people would come back to where I stood to shake my hand or try to hug me; I was as frozen and stiff as Richard Nixon.*

*After this, Scripture was read, and then the minister...would preach...and it would be ...enough to send me running back to the sanctuary of the flea market...*

*I went back to St. Andrew about once a month. No one tried to con me into sitting down or staying. I always left before the sermon. I loved the singing, even about Jesus, but I just didn't want to be preached at about him.... Something inside me that was stiff and rotting would feel soft and tender. Somehow that singing wore down all the boundaries and distinctions that kept me so isolated. Sitting there, standing with them to sing, sometimes so shaky and sick that I felt like I might tip over, I felt bigger than myself, like I was being taken care of, tricked into coming back to life.*

*(Traveling Mercies, pp. 46-48)*

Anne LaMott eventually goes to St. Andrew's Church regularly. And then she joins the church. And then she starts teaching a children's Sunday School class. She begins to heal and God invites her to discover more about this journey of faith. She is an active member there today. All of her struggles are not over, but now she has come back to life in the midst of a community of faith. And it started with the music.

How does God call us back to life? First we must hear a melody from God. We are loved. God shows us who we are to be and how we are to live and seek to follow the ways of Jesus. This can give us our basic melody.

It is a Holy Mystery. Musicians offer their skills as a gift. Musicians affect us, they improve the quality of our lives, and the results cannot be reduced to explanation. So play, young David, play. Play that stringed instrument. Point us toward something worth living for. Make some music that restores our souls. Bring us to a place where God can heal our hearts. Amen.

### **Resource**

William G. Carter, *Jazz in the Pulpit: Biblical Reflections on the Syncopated Art*, 2010  
Ebook, Presbybop Music, pages 38-41