

## ***Music is a Language We All Understand***

Psalm 150 – Music Sunday

Today is Music Appreciation Sunday, the day that we focus our attention on music in the church. We are turning to one of the many passages in scripture that speak about music. Music is very integral to the Biblical tradition, and it's integral to our lives as well. I hope to celebrate those realities today. I'll be reading from Psalm 150, the last Psalm in the Psalter – let's pay attention to how many different musical instruments are mentioned in this Psalm.

Read Psalm 150. Pray.

The multi-talented musical genius Stevie Wonder opened his famous song called "Sir Duke" by singing this lyric about music itself: "Music is a world within itself, it's a language we all understand. With an equal opportunity for all to sing, dance and clap their hands." This song appeared on Stevie Wonder's best known album "Songs in the Key of Life" released in 1976 by Motown Records. It won 4 Grammy awards, including album of the year. Although not scripture, those Stevie Wonder lyrics are very true to life and true to our worship life as well. Indeed, music is a language we all understand.

Ever since I felt a call to ministry, I've taken that concept to heart. I have a vehement desire to plan worship services where the music and the preaching are very closely intertwined. This isn't just because I like to hang out with organists, but it also reflects the 2 timeless truths that music helps us to praise God and music helps us to learn.

Did you know that the human brain learns much better if we learn with music? Research has shown that preschool children who are exposed to music through games and songs have an IQ of 10 to 20 points higher than preschoolers taught without music. In the same study, students at age 15 with musical experience had higher reading and math scores in comparison to 15 year olds without musical experience. Brain studies across the board indicate that exposure to music alters and increases brain function to make the necessary connections for higher order thinking. In short, music focuses our concentration, increases our attention, and improves our memory. Music helps us to learn.

Every Sunday, Pastor Stu and I stand up here in the pulpit and preach the Word of God. What we are trying to do is help us all to learn about scripture and apply it to our daily lives. This is learning. However, many studies have shown that even the smartest people only remember only about 10% of what Pastor Stu and I say in worship. It doesn't help us to become better disciples if we forget what we learned as soon as we hit the parking lot! But, if you add music to the preaching, music that further expands upon the thematic elements in the scripture passage, many more of you will remember what we have said, many more of you will take it to heart, and many more of you will move closer to the person God wants you to be.

I'll give you an example: Three weeks ago, I preached on John chapter 10, where Jesus says that he is the Good Shepherd. Who remembers everything I said in that sermon? (No, don't raise

your hands, it would be embarrassing). But, if I asked you if you remember Carolyn Smith standing in the lectern singing the George Gerschwin classic “Someone to Watch Over Me” as part of the sermon time, you would remember that, wouldn’t you? You might hum the song in your head and then that would trigger in your brain that the scriptural theme that day was that Jesus is our Good Shepherd who watches over us every day of our lives. Do you see the point? We put the music with the scripture and music helps us to learn. Even from the standpoint of the preacher, my most memorable sermons have been, by far, the ones that were accompanied by songs that carried the scriptural theme into the deep, dark recesses of my mind. Music helps me to learn. Music helps me to remember.

So, in worship, music helps us to learn what we came here to learn – God’s Word to us for this day.

But, in addition to learning about God’s Word in worship, we come here to praise the living God. We accomplish that through music as well. Psalm 150, our scripture passage for today, shows us that that is exactly what God wants us to do. Praise God through music. The whole psalm is about the wonder of God and the infectious character of celebrating God’s glory with music:

“Praise God in his sanctuary . . . Praise him with trumpet sound, praise him with lute and harp, praise him with tambourine and dance, praise him with strings and pipe, praise him with clanging cymbals, praise him with loud clashing cymbals. Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!”

Psalm 150 is the last Psalm in the Psalter, the culmination of all 150 Psalms, and it comes to us in 3 parts: vv. 1-2 show who is to be praised (God); vv. 3-5 show us how to praise (with music); and v. 6 shows us who should offer praise (everything that breathes). Worship in the ancient temple is in view here, and music is featured. Every section of the orchestra is represented – horns, strings, pipes, and percussion, all joining in a symphony of praise. Psalm 150 is a witness to the power of music, a power that transcends all barriers and a power that we all understand.

Psalm 150 has inspired some wonderful music as well, that we can use to praise God even further. On January 19, 1968, the fabulous Duke Ellington performed a concert of sacred music at St. John the Divine cathedral in New York City, at which he debuted Christian music that he wrote himself. Among the songs he performed and later recorded was his musical interpretation of Psalm 150. He called it “Praise God and Dance.” (Play it at 943). Ellington said that this music, and the two other albums of sacred music he recorded, were “the most important thing I have ever done.” When Ellington performed “Praise God and Dance” at the ancient Church of Santa Maria del Mar in Barcelona, Spain, the congregation burst into the aisles to participate in the infectious music and message of praising God in song. At that moment in Barcelona, Spain, the music transcended all language barriers without difficulty as people were praising God together, because music is a language we all understand. We remember Duke Ellington for *Satin Doll*, but he wants to be remembered for “Psalm 150 – Praise God and Dance.”

Even beyond Psalm 150 and the other musical Psalms, the Bible is full of examples of music being used to praise God. In 2 Samuel 6, when King David finally got the Ark of the Covenant back from the hands of the enemy Philistines, he was so excited that he praised God by singing and dancing before the Lord. Scripture says, "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." What a concert that must have been as they offered up their musical praise for God's victory!

And over in the New Testament, when Jesus and his disciples had their last meal together, (that we now know as the Last Supper), before Jesus was taken away and crucified, he gathered his friends around him and they sang a hymn. Which hymn was it? We don't know. But scripture tells us that Jesus knew he was going to his death and the last thing he wanted to do with his friends as a group was to sing praise to God.

And who can forget the marvelous scene at the end of the Bible in the book of Revelation? When John of Patmos tells us his divine vision of God on His throne in Revelation chapter four, one of the most memorable parts of the scene is the music. God is seated there on his throne, with lightning and thunder all around Him, and the spectacular 4 living creatures sitting around the throne are singing God's praise all day and all night, "Holy, holy, holy the Lord God Almighty . . ." And the 24 elders who encircle the throne are also singing, "You are worthy, our Lord and our God . . ." What a medley of song from the very throne room of God, that shows us that no matter whether we are on this earth or in the heavenly realm, praising God with song will be our duty and our fate. And what a fate it is! Music is a language we all understand – even God.

My friends, we all love music. We all have our favorite types of music. We all enjoy it in our lives. We all like to walk around with our iPods going and our earbuds stuck in our ears. But in the church, music holds a special place because it helps us to learn the Word of God and because it helps us to praise God in a way that mere spoken words cannot do. God blesses us with the gift of music and He wants us to bless Him in return with musical praise.

I'd like to conclude this morning with the words of one more Psalm, Psalm 147, another musical psalm. It goes like this:

*"Clap your hands all you people, shout to God with loud songs of joy; for the Lord, the most high, is awesome, a great king over all the Earth."*

Let us continue our praise of God with music forever more. Praise be to God. Amen.