

Isaiah 52: 7-10
Matthew 26: 30
February 13, 2011
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church
Music Appreciation Sunday

In honor of Music Appreciation Sunday I have selected texts which feature, of all things, music and singing. I do this because this annual recognition of the critical importance of music—and by implication our musicians—gives me the opportunity to expand upon an important biblical fact.

This fact is remarkably simple, yet profound. In the Bible music in general and singing in particular is always a *response* to living life in relationship to and with God. The Psalms are all *songs*. They are not all joyous. Sometimes they are angry. Sometimes they are grief stricken. Sometimes they are despairing. Yet the psalms are *always* expressions of life lived in relationship to and with God. Sacred music is in scripture *always a response to our experience of living in relationship to and with God.* .

The words of this morning's choral anthem capture this experience: *how can I keep from singing!* This is not so much a question as a declaration. It is what is called a rhetorical question: one in which the answer is already given. How can I keep from singing? I can't!

The texts from Isaiah and Matthew illustrate this point in starkly contrasting ways. Though the prophet Isaiah God speaks words of amazing good news:

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns." Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices, together they sing for joy; for in plain sight they see the return of the Lord to Zion. Break forth into singing you ruins of Jerusalem; for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem.

In this beautiful passage God through the prophet announces the end of the long exile in Babylon. Sentinels are pictured as being overcome with joy as they see the exiles return. Even the ruined walls of the city rejoice as they anticipate the restoring of their broken and scattered stones.

Songs of joy break forth because God has been faithful! God has not abandoned God's people! God is restoring Jerusalem and re-establishing his presence in Jerusalem and restoring Israel to full relationship.

God's powerful grace thus elicits a joyful response which is intended to lift the people's hearts in hope and to gather their energy to follow God's lead. This means that the people will return to Jerusalem and will undertake the arduous work of rebuilding the Jerusalem. They will witness to the power of God by their full and active response.

The passage from Matthew is set in a very different context. If the movement expressed through Isaiah is from darkness to light, that of Matthew is the reverse. Jesus has celebrated the Passover seder with his disciples. He has announced that he will be betrayed by one of those closest to him. When the meal is concluded, Matthew simply and bleakly remarks, "When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives."

Nearly all translations render the verse, "When they had sung *a* hymn....;" but the New Revised Standard Version gets it right by employing the definite article "the." For the fact is that Jesus and his disciples did not sing just any hymn at that somber moment. They sang what in the Jewish tradition is called the *Hallel*, which comprises Psalms 114-118. Surprisingly these are songs of praise and trust in the power of God.

Given the tragic and dread-ful setting we might find it difficult to imagine Jesus and the disciples singing a song of praise as he intentionally walks into the arms of those who will crucify him. And yet it is here that the power of music in general and singing in particular takes on such inspiring significance.

It is one thing to sing for joy when we can see the end to our suffering and can rejoice in God's deliverance. Thus when I announce to you that in six short weeks the great siege of winter will be over and the mountains of snow will melt away and flowers will bloom, those of you who believe me will take heart and joyfully look forward to that great day. Yet it is quite another matter when we are on the verge of something we fear: a devastating medical diagnosis, the break up of a cherished relationship, the loss of a job, the death of one we love. To go out into that reality singing a song of praise and trust in God's power is beyond what most of us are capable of doing.

And yet. And yet, this is what it means to be people of faith. We are people who believe that Jesus, even though his heart was heavy with dread, went out into the darkness singing a song of praise—of trust in the living God.

We are people who believe that in a way we can never understand, Jesus carried that song of praise in his heart through the terrible torture, rejection, crucifixion and abandonment.

We are people who believe that when from the cross Jesus cried, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"; it was a cry of trust that carried our cries of fear and despair.

And finally we are people who believe that when God raised Jesus from the dead on Easter morning that faith was utterly vindicated. Jesus emerged from the tomb able to

look us in the eye and say, God is faithful. If God vindicated my trust he will vindicate yours. If God raised me from the dead he will raise you.

There is no power in heaven or on earth that can overcome the great fact that death has no final say on life. We are people who profess and live in faith that no matter how discouraging, hopeless and tragic life is, God is faithful. No matter how hard life is, God has made a way in Jesus Christ and all we have to do is follow.

All we have to do is follow *and sing, make music* as a witness that the victorious love of God in Jesus Christ is the true reality. In this way it is not our voices or our hands which ring bells or our fingers which touch the keys of organ and piano or strum guitar strings—*it is our lives which sing*. It is our lives which make the music of heaven which rises joyfully above the discordant clamor of the world. It is our lives responding to the great symphony of God that awaken in others the music of God. Amen.