

“When in Our Music God Is Glorified”

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship on September 13, 2020
Our first Sunday of In-person worship during the Coronavirus Pandemic!
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
Text: 1 Samuel 16:14-23

I’ve missed you!! I’ve missed every single one of you and I am so very, very happy that we are able to be back worshipping together in our beautiful sanctuary, even if it is under odd circumstances. This is a momentous day, a happy day, and, in truth, one more day in our journey together as the people of God in this community. We have learned much about the role of the church in our lives during our almost 6 month absence from this, our church home. We’ve learned that worship continues, prayer continues, the work and ministry of the church continues – whether we are able to be together here in our beloved building, or gathered together via the internet or even the words of a common Worship Resource we all relied on together. We’ve experienced that our connections with each other run much deeper than just how much time we spend together in worship, in prayer and working on all our many favorite projects connected to the church. Most of all, we have learned that we are stronger and more resilient than we ever thought we could be as we faced the challenges and worries of this global pandemic.

Those of you here in the sanctuary can see all around you the efforts of our Pandemic Response Team who have been working together to make this day a reality since early last June. Their primary goal, and mine, was to work toward this day keeping the health, safety and well-being of our most vulnerable members at the forefront of everything we do. This has meant working together to keep current on the rapidly changing guidelines provided by the CT and RI Health Departments, as well as the CDC and the denominational regional offices of the United Church of Christ. I want to commend all the efforts of these folks on the Pandemic Response Team who have taken to heart their responsibilities for making this day possible.*

In addition to the reservations system, the controlled access and directed walk-ways, the hand sanitizer and the face masks, the blocked off pews and the double lecterns, I have no doubt that the biggest challenge we and all churches face as we return to in-person worship is the reality that

we cannot sing together. Singing, the scientists tell us, is a “super spreader” activity which is one of the things we must avoid as the Coronavirus still lurks in our midst. When you think about the body mechanics of singing, that makes sense. You breathe more deeply than usual to take in enough air to sing and then, even if you sing softly, the sheer act of forcing the air back out of your lungs in a way that causes your vocal chords to vibrate in song forces excess air out of your lungs, carrying any nasty little covid germs along for the ride. I understand this no singing business seems excessive, especially since our sincere belief is that everyone here already is as sure as they can be that they are not sick. And we trust that no one would knowingly come to worship if they were sick. But, it’s the awful sneakiness of this disease we have to guard against – that you could be sick and not know it yet or that you could be a carrier – someone who has the germ but doesn’t get sick from it. And so, in a super abundance of caution, we will not be singing together for awhile nor will we be enjoying our wonderful choir for awhile either.

So, given this predicament, I have been pondering all summer long what we might do to fill this sad gap where our singing would usually be. I have come up with a few solutions that will allow us to continue to celebrate the hymns and music we love, albeit in different ways. First, as you have already experienced, we are not singing the words of our hymns out loud. Rather, we are reading the lyrics thoughtfully as we listen to the beautiful music that would normally accompany our singing. As we do, perhaps you will be transported in your heart to another place and time when you can vividly recall a memory singing the hymn before us during worship. This has happened to me several times since we began this new way of enjoying the hymns together and I’d love to know if it happens to you too. Second, I hope you have all noticed our “pew signs” which have a decidedly musical orientation. This just seemed like one way to remember and cherish those hymns we love and have a little fun with a weird situation at the same time. Finally, I realized that this weird hiatus from congregational singing provides an outstanding and unique opportunity for me to offer a sermon series on well known and loved hymns. And here we are.

Now I will confess, I do think this is one of my better ideas but I was also daunted by the idea of identifying which hymns to preach on. I love

hymns and have many favorites but I was also curious to know how others would react to this idea and what suggestions they might have. So, I posted the question on two clergy Facebook chat groups I belong to, one of which is international, as well as two local community Facebook groups. I was overwhelmed by the response, to put it mildly. I received close to 100 suggestions with very few repeats, something in itself is extraordinary. I soon realized I already knew many of the suggested hymns very well, but a few I didn't know at all. I was surprised by what was on the list but even more surprised by what wasn't. All in all, it has been a fascinating project which is still very much a work in process. I have tentatively identified the 15 hymns I will be preaching on between now and the beginning of Advent at the end of November, but I am totally willing and excited to continue to hear from you about the hymns you love and why you love them. I would love this to be a sermon series we create together to celebrate our rich and textured hymnody as we rediscover their beauty in lyric and melody by savoring them in an entirely new way. So, please! Let me know your favorite hymns and why they are your favorite!

But where to begin? Now that you understand why things are the way they are in the church during these Coronavirus days we must endure, and you understand the plan to savor our music in an entirely new way, what hymn should I begin with? Well, I confess, that was an easy choice. As will be our pattern for worship this fall, we already heard the hymn which is our focus for today as it was the first hymn of this morning's service – "When in Our Music God is Glorified." Where else would we start but with this hymn? It is described in www.hymnary.org as "the only hymn text in Christendom that explains the reasons for church music while simultaneously offering 'allelulias' to God."

(https://hymnary.org/text/when_in_our_music_god_is_glorified)

The unique words of the hymn's text were written by the Rev. Fred Pratt Green in 1971 in Norwich, England. Green is one of the best known 20th century hymn writers in the British Isles and his much beloved hymns appear in hymnals throughout the British Isles as well as the United States. Ordained to the ministry in the British Methodist church, Green was asked by John W. Wilson to compose this text specifically for the annual conference of the Methodist Church Music Society held in London in 1971.

He was asked to write it for the tune ENGELBERG, itself composed by Charles V. Stanford circa 1904 as an alternate tune for the lyrics to “For All the Saints.” Green’s lyrics describe all the ways in which singing hymns enriches worship. The first stanza addresses our humility in performance (*adoration leaves no room for pride*). Stanzas 2 and 3 describe the aesthetics of musical worship (*how often we have found a new dimension in the world of sound ... moved us to a more profound Allelulia!*). Stanzas 4 & 5 reflect on the biblical foundations of hymns, including a reference to Psalm 150 (*Let every instrument be tuned for praise*).

https://hymnary.org/text/when_in_our_music_god_is_glorified

Clearly, Rev. Pratt Green had a deep experience of and appreciation for the central importance of music in worship – of singing hymns together – as he put these words to paper. He even included a specific biblical reference in the last stanza. So, why then, did I choose some story about David and Saul as the scripture I would like us to consider in connection to this hymn? Because this ancient story, I think, gets to the real reason we feel so connected to the hymns we sing in church together each Sunday. This story from 1 Samuel reveals the power music has to ease our worries, calm our souls and help us find that connection to God which can sometimes feel so elusive. Let’s look at the story to see what I mean.

This story comes after the first king of the Israelites – Saul – had fallen out of favor with God. Now, it’s important to understand that God was never too keen on the Israelites having a king in the first place. God didn’t understand why his being king wasn’t enough for the people, with the Judges – the tribal elders – functioning on the human level as needed. Well, long story short, the Israelites wanted a king because everybody else had a king and they didn’t feel like they were a real nation without their own king. So, God relented and after a process overseen by the prophet Samuel, Saul was anointed king over the united kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Saul soon proved a disappointment to God as king because he had this annoying tendency to do what he thought was right instead of what God told him to do. And this is where today’s story fits into the picture.

Saul, at this point, is well aware that he has lost God’s favor. He is in great despair over this, given over to fits of depression that the text describes as being tormented by an evil spirit. His servants saw how he was

suffering as a result and gave him the suggestion of finding a musician who could play music to soothe him at those moments when he felt most upset. Saul agreed and arrangements were made for Jesse's youngest son, David, to come to Saul's household as a sort of personal assistant. Saul came to love David very much and David, who was very skilled with the lyre, played "whenever the evil spirit from God came upon Saul ... and Saul would be relieved and feel better." Saul would be relieved and feel better. That was the magic of music. That is the magic of music in any setting, but especially the church. Especially our church, every Sunday.

Music guides us through worship, from start to finish. We enter fully into the experience of worship as the notes of the prelude remind us where we are and why. The opening hymn opens our hearts and minds to God's presence in the moment. The meditation music after the Scriptures are read and the sermon offered provide space for the Word of God to sink in. Then, the familiar comfort of singing the doxology celebrates the sharing of our gifts with God through this church. The closing hymn prepares us to return to the world, taking the sweet renewal and refreshment we have just experienced with us as we leave to the inspirational harmony of the postlude played so skillfully on our beautiful pipe organ. Dear ones, the simple truth is that music is the glue holding worship together, soothing our souls even as it opens our hearts. While it's true we won't be singing out loud for a little while, we can sing as loud as we want in our hearts. We can sing in our cars on our way home from worship. We can sing to our children and grandchildren. Simply put, we sing because we can. We sing because in our music, however it is expressed in our hearts and souls, our God is glorified. In our music, sung or just savored, we find hope for the darkest days, inspiration for the toughest challenges, comfort for the times when our hearts and our bodies are aching. Dear ones, in our music, sung out loud or only in our hearts, we connect with God on a deeper level than we can imagine. Nothing, not even Covid, can ever change that. Amen.