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Hymn Sing Sunday: Musical Meanderings and Meditations

We've been using the theme "Road Trip! - Great Journeys in the Bible" as our summer sermon series. And we've seen only a few of the many journeys in the Bible that tell us something about God and ourselves. What we haven't touched on, though, is how many of those journeys were accompanied by music:

- When the prophet Isaiah announced the end of the Hebrew people's exile in Babylon, he said this: "*...you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song....*" (55:12).
- When Moses led the people out of their slavery in Egypt and across the Red Sea into Sinai, his sister Miriam led the people in this song: "*The Lord is my strength and my defense [and] my salvation....*" (Exodus 15:2).
- Of course there is an entire songbook in the Bible, the Psalms, which have comforted and emboldened countless generations of Jews and Christians.
- After Mary hears the news that she will bear Jesus, she sings a glorious song that has come to be called The Magnificat extolling the justice of God before her own road trip to her cousin Elizabeth.
- The Song of Solomon is a collection of romantic and even erotic love songs that two lovers sing to one another as they make their visits to one another.

We could go on and on. There are, in fact, about two hundred songs captured in the Bible and many of them are sung as part of or as preparation for a journey of some sort.¹

It is the same with us, isn't it? Most of us when preparing for a road trip find

¹<http://overviewbible.com/bible-songs/>

music essential – whether played on an A.M. radio in the 1950s, an 8 track cassette player in the 1960s, or mp3's on an iPod now. The songs and the generations and the technology may change but from the time Americans began to travel –on horseback or in an oxcart, fleeing the evil of slavery on foot via the Underground Railroad, on canal boats or on trains or in cars – they have been accompanied by singing. What songs do you associate with your own road trips, your own journeys? When you hear them even now, I'll bet you are taken back to one of those trips. In fact, scientists tell us that the two things that are the most powerful in transporting us back to an earlier time and place are music and smells. Am I right? Barbara's and my youngest daughter says that a whiff of a certain kind of perfume can immediately take her back into her grandmother's arms, with a feeling of utter love and security. For me, the smell of hot asphalt on a summer day will transport me back to the smell on a Saturday afternoon at Six Flags Over Texas, there with the church youth group, with much dramatic teenage conversation about who likes whom and who wants to go on which ride with whom. And music is even more powerful in this regard. Whenever I hear the strains of Steely Dan's song "Rikki Don't Lose That Number" I am immediately back in the summer of 1974, driving down Westheimer Road in Houston, Texas, with that Houston cloak of oil-aroma-and-humidity wrapped around me as I go from my little garage apartment to the church where I was a summer ministerial intern. Whenever I hear Israel Kamakawiwoole's glorious Hawaiian song "Hele On to Kauai," I am transported back to a wonderful day trip to the island of Kauai with Barbara, the gardens we saw, the place on Hanalei Bay we ate lunch, the stuffed animal dolphin we bought. Whenever I hear the strains of the Navy Hymn, "Eternal Father Strong to Save," I am once again ten years old, watching President Kennedy's funeral.

Now, it would be possible to journey without music, just as it would be possible to worship without music. In fact, one of the Disciples of Christ founders, Alexander

Campbell, printed no musical notation in the hymnal he published because he thought music was “a distraction from the truth and power of the words.”² But, to my mind, that is both a silly and a false distinction. For you see – to recur to our theme for the day - God is indeed glorified when our words truly honor and do not blaspheme or belittle who God is: when our words about God reflect the fact that God is no bully, that God is love unbounded and unconditional, that God seeks our good only, judges us when we fall short, forgives us, and offers us a way to move forward with hope. All of those are good and God-glorifying words. But music and melody can also do honor to, glorify, God. I’m not talking about new songs versus old hymns here. For there can be “old” music that is schlocky and mind-deadening, and there is “new” music that is schlocky and mind-deadening. There are old hymns that are awful and new hymns that are wondrous – and vice versa. Now, make no mistake: it’s hard to “quantify” this, to put metrics to it. Yet what I know is this: gorgeous and God-seeking and God-glorifying music, music fit to accompany us on our own journeys through life, music fit for worshiping our God, can come in every style and every form, for at its essence such music is a *creative mixture of harmony and chaos*. A *creative mixture of harmony and chaos*. The tune to “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” is **not** God-glorifying music for it is all harmony and utter placidity. On the other hand, the “music” I would make if I were to begin plunking on the piano would not be God-glorifying for it would be all chaos. But some music – be it classical or country, banjo or bassoon, chant or chimes, harpsichord or hip-hop – indeed strikes that God-glorifying note of **both** harmony and chaos and thereby gives musical voice to the God who does not want there be *too* much harmony – for that would mean injustice and inequity also thrive. God is glorified when we remember that God wants a little bit – or sometimes a lot! – of chaos to get under our skins and make us dissatisfied with our lives if we are too scared by the prospect of

²Cited in The Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement, page 409.

change, if we are too willing to settle for the mediocre instead of reaching for the best, if we are too inclined to rest easy with injustice. But when harmony and chaos fetchingly form together in our music then the God who loves us just as we are – but loves us too much to ever leave us where we are – is indeed glorified. Amen.