

Text: Exodus 15: 1-21
Title: Singing Liberation
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Roger Allen Nelson

Do you have any songs that even just the first few bars take you back to some other place and some other time? Do you have any moments that were so shaped and defined by music that somehow you can't separate the experience from the music ~ for it's all of one piece?

For example, I can't hear "Peter and the Wolf" without reliving part of my childhood. Every time I hear that whistle (*whistle...*) I am transported back to sitting on the living room floor and listening to the music and looking at the big colorful book that came with the record, and my mom is in the kitchen making chicken casserole, and my dad is reading, and the Time-Life collection "Music of the Baroque" is tucked right next to the slot where I pulled out "Peter and the Wolf," and I feel the same wonder and contentment I knew as a child.

Music has a powerful mysterious way of sinking into, shaping, and defining time.
It is that quality that keeps oldie radio stations in business.
It is that quality that makes church worship wars so personal.
It is that quality that gives movie soundtracks their punch.
It is that quality that links music to profound pain and sublime joy.

Music has a powerful mysterious way of sinking into, shaping, and defining time.
Music can unlock emotions at a funeral,
or enrich a romantic moment,
or stir national pride,
or tap into deep memories,
or carry some expression of healing.

Do you have any moments that were so shaped and defined by music that somehow you can't separate the experience from the music ~ for it's all of one piece?

Our text this morning is that kind of song. This hymn, celebrating God's victory over Pharaoh and his army, is one of the oldest songs in scripture. Its lyrics are picked-up in countless psalms, its imagery helped shape Israel's identity, and its voice helped define a relationship with God.

The back story to this ballad - briefly told:

In the middle of the night there was a loud wailing for ~ from the son of the one on the throne to the son of the one in the dungeon ~ all the first born had been struck down. Therefore, Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and told them to take their people and their critters and go.

So, with dough before the yeast was added,
and a change of clothes slung over their shoulders,
and their toothbrushes in their mouth,
and their sandals unlaced,
the Israelites ran.
430 years of slavery was over.
They were free! They were liberated! Thanks be to God!

Led by a pillar of cloud during the day and a pillar of fire during the night, the Israelites traipsed a circuitous route in the wilderness. Then, as the horror of the night faded, Pharaoh regretted releasing his cheap labor, rounded up his best chariots, horses, and best men, and stormed off into the desert ~ pinning the Israelites against the sea.

But, in the middle of confusion and fear and rebellion Moses stretched his hand out over the sea, God caused the water to pile up like a Gulf Coast storm surge, and the Israelites went through on what the text describes as dry ground. (You'd think it would at least be soggy?) Pharaoh and his men followed and God caused the walls of water to come-a-tumbling-down, drowning the army.

So, God's people sang to mark their liberation. Miriam told the women get out their dancing shoes and break out the tambourines and they sang because they were happy, they sang because they were free.

*Sing to the Lord, for he is highly exalted.
Both horse and rider he has hurled into the sea.
~ snappy little tune, easy to dance to ~*

Many scholars believe that the Song of Moses was inserted into the text later; that Miriam's song came first and Moses' song was an elaboration. It was a song sung to recite and reenact and remember what happened; it was passed from generation to generation; and it powerfully mysteriously sunk in, shaped, and defined God's people. It's a song that starts with God tossing horse and rider into the sea and ends with God reigning for eternity.

Now, I think what's instructive is that this remarkable exodus experience is bracketed by ways to remember and relive the event. On the one side are the instructions for eating the Passover meal (last week's text) and the other is a song celebrating liberation. They are sort of like liturgical bookends that would hold the exodus event in the hearts and minds of the Israelites.

Their identity is shaped and transmitted and reinforced by these expressions of ritual and song. They know themselves to be those who were liberated from slavery by God because they remember it in ritual and song.

Therefore, wonderful colorful Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann writes:

The substance of the song is that our God is stronger, incomparably stronger, than your god. It follows that our mode of reality is no longer controlled and administered by your mode of reality. In this poetic act Israel first tells an alternative story, enacts an alternative reality, and envisions a different shaping of life. Yet the mode is as important as the substance. This is indeed a "hoedown," not only in the sense of dance but also in the sense of work stoppage (putting your hoe down), acting freely in someone else's world without obeying...

I submit that it is liturgy because scenarios must be tried in the safety of community before one can go public in a hostile arena. So, a ritual defiance occurs before there is any public defiance.

Dear friends, what if what we do in worship, week in and week out, is sing an alternative reality? The music that we sing, the pieces played on piano, flute, organ, and guitar, the songs of the choir, the lyrics in the gray book and the green book.....are in fact shaping and defining an alternative reality. When we sing we are shaping and defining a people. The music is not just filler,

or a balm for a sick soul,
or a glue to hold us together,
or a defiant stance against the slippery slope of sloppy sentimental spirituality,
or the cherishing of a certain form of music,
or the lifting of a high brow over against the low brow of fuzzy microphones and praise leaders with hands raised and eyes closed in some ethereal ecstasy....

But, rather our singing itself is a political act. Not in the sense of McCain or Obama, but as that which forms a people ~ a polis. It's not prelim to political action or preparation for political act, but it is that which shapes and defines and celebrates an alternative people (*Michael Vander Weele*).

For church is not something that we do,
church is something that we are, the called out, liberated, people of God.

And, maybe that doesn't seem like much, but...
we sing of resurrection in the face of death,
we sing of light in the middle of darkness,
we sing of hope on the downside of an empire,
we sing of something more than what we can see,
we sing of belonging in a culture of disconnection,
we sing of freedom in a creation that groans for liberation,
we sing....

Most every week on Tuesday mornings I meet with Dora or Lynn (our gifted and faithful organists) and we plan the service. I typically write the liturgy and then together we flip through hymn books and pick the music. We're trying to balance styles of music, and

trying to incorporate a variety of instruments and the voices of others. We're trying to pick lyrics that fit the flow of the liturgy, and.... and we're trying to identify music that powerfully and mysteriously shapes and defines a people. For, without being rigid and inflexible, and recognizing that all music raised up to God is good,

we want to pass along music that tells the story of liberation,
we want to pass along a rich hymn tradition to our children,
we want to pass along a grammar ~ a way of thinking and talking and framing creation,

we want to create musical space for you
to hear God,
and praise God,
and rest in God,
and be shaped by God.

After the assault on the civil rights marchers in Selma, Alabama in 1965, the call went out for a massive march from Selma to Montgomery. Martin Luther King was the organizer and Abraham Heschel ~ a white bearded, yarmulke wearing rabbi, who looked like the archetype Hebrew prophet ~ asked to walk beside King in the front row.

Just before the march began, a service was held in which they read Psalm 27, "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?" And, with singing and praying and remembering the story of Israel's liberation,

they set out for Montgomery,
they set out for justice,
they set out for peace.

For Heschel, the march had spiritual significance. He wrote later:

For many of us the march from Selma to Montgomery was about protest and prayer. Legs are not lips and walking is not kneeling. And yet our legs uttered songs. Even without words, our march was worship. I felt my legs were praying.

Now maybe that is political, maybe that is public defiance, but it doesn't happen without first having a shared grammar, a shared story, a shared song ~ a song of liberation.

Dear friends, we sing because we're free!
Amen.