

“Washing Away the Dust of the Soul”

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Continuing a series *A King for God’s People*

1st Samuel 16:14-23

September 18, 2016

Now the Lord’s Spirit had departed from Saul, and a harmful spirit from the Lord tormented him. Saul’s servants said to him, “Look, a harmful spirit from God is tormenting you. If our master just says the word, your servants will search for someone who knows how to play the lyre. The musician can play whenever the harmful spirit from God is affecting you, and then you’ll feel better.”

Saul said to his servants, “Find me a good musician and bring him to me.”

One of the servants responded, “I know that one of Jesse’s sons from Bethlehem is a good musician. He’s a strong man and heroic, a warrior who speaks well and is good-looking too. The Lord is with him.”

So Saul sent messengers to Jesse to say, “Send me your son David, the one who keeps the sheep.”

Jesse then took a donkey and loaded it with a homer of bread, a jar of wine, and a young goat, and he sent it along with his son David to Saul. That is how David came to Saul and entered his service.

Saul liked David very much, and David became his armour-bearer. Saul sent a message to Jesse: “Please allow David to remain in my service because I am pleased with him.”

Whenever the harmful spirit from God affected Saul, David would take the lyre and play it. Then Saul would relax and feel better, and the harmful spirit would leave him alone.

1st Samuel 16:14-23

Contemporary English Version (alt)

John Wesley put this into his *Directions for Singing*:

*“Sing Lustily – and with good courage.
Beware of singing as if you were half-dead or half-asleep;
but lift up your voice with strength.”¹*

¹ Originally published in John Wesley’s Select Hymns (1761). A version of his “Directions for Singing” is in Voices United, 720.

I also like this bit of wisdom:

“Those who sing, pray twice.”

We offer both our words and our melodies to God.²

I love this, written by 19th-century German-Jewish poet Berthold Auerbach:

“Music washes away from the soul, the dust of everyday life.”⁸

II

Saul needed soul-washing.

It says, *“the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul.”* He was still king, still ruling God’s people. Yet he no longer had God’s blessing.

Instead, it says, *“a harmful spirit from the Lord tormented him.”* What do we make of this? The Hebrew word *rā’âh* can mean a range of things: evil, vicious, bad, harmful, disagreeable, displeasing, inferior.⁴ Something was besetting Saul. Later his behaviour will become erratic, even violent.⁵ People have tried diagnosing what psychological malady Saul had, but we simply don’t have enough information.⁶ We just know Saul was troubled in his mind, his soul.

It says God gave Saul his affliction! Oh my. . . .

I’ve talked with you before about how I’ve lived with depression and anxiety for much of my adult life. You have your own stories of mental illness. Does God give us these things? I guess God can use anything for God’s good purposes. I trust God.

Let me insist, emphatically, that while God wonderfully holds you, me and the whole world in God’s hands, this world God holds (and us in it), is tattered and torn, battered and bruised. It’s only because God keeps holding it all, and keeps mending it back together,

² Tradition says this wisdom comes from Saint Augustine in the 5th century, but that is questionable. Whoever said it, they were right! <http://wdtprs.com/blog/2006/02/st-augustine-he-who-sings-prays-twice/>

³ In his 1864 novel, “Auf der Höhe” (“On the Heights”). See <http://quoteinvestigator.com/2016/02/17/soul/>.

⁴ V. Philips Long, “1 Samuel” in John H. Walton (ed), Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary Volume 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 343.

⁵ 1 Samuel 18:10-11.

⁶ See, for example, L. Ben-Noun, “What Was the Mental Disease that Afflicted King Saul?” Clinical Case Studies, 2.4 (2003), 270-282, cited in Carolyn K. Williams, (KING) DAVID: Simply a skilled musician, or an accomplished music therapist? A Music Therapist’s Narrative Journey, Masters Thesis, Wilfred Laurier University. n.d. <https://web.wlu.ca/soundeffects/researchlibrary/Carolyn.pdf>

that we have any chance at all. Thank God!

Let me also insist, strongly, that whatever diagnoses or disease might come your way, in body or in mind, it does not mean you are evil, or cursed, or forsaken by God. Our maladies are signs of how wrong things are, how torn from God's good designs this world is. Diseases are among the symptoms of the greater dis-ease, a destructiveness which God detests and from which God is saving us.

Suppose Saul's affliction did come from God. Does that mean Greg's afflictions come from God? No. Your afflictions? No. Such things are far beyond me to figure out.

Once, Jesus' followers asked him why a man was afflicted. "What was the cause?" they wanted to know. "What does it mean?" Jesus did not answer. Instead, he basically said, look at what God is doing now, in that situation of suffering.⁷

So, Saul . . . What was God doing with him?⁸

III

Apparently, God was sending him Davey.

A couple of weeks ago, we saw how God chose Davey to be the next king, while he was still a young boy. This happened privately. Last week we saw that Davey is a fighter (remember Goliath). In the future, we will see him become a leader. Today, we see he is a musician and a healer.⁹

Remember, "*music washes away from the soul, the dust of everyday life.*"

Davey's healing is not miraculous. Music is simply sounds, organized in a particular way, for the moment.¹⁰

⁷ See John 9.

⁸ I've asked this before. See my August 28, 2016 sermon, "The Broken King."

⁹ In the Bible, the Goliath story comes after this one. I switched the order of how we considered the stories, for scheduling reasons. Figuring out how the two stories relate is tricky. In 1st Samuel 17:1-58, we get the sense that Saul never met David before he came to the army camp. Yet 16:14-23 makes clear that he certainly had, and close-up. It's hard to know what to make of the two stories and how they might fit together.

¹⁰ K. E. Bruscia described music as "The art of temporarily organizing sounds." Quoted in Williams, 9.

Yet music is profound. What power it has! ¹¹

- “There’ll be bluebirds over, the white cliffs of Dover,” takes a particular generation to another time.¹² (For me, it’s Boy George singing Karma Chameleon. Not the same!)¹³
- A bunch of people sitting at tables around a room becomes a community of celebration. All it takes are Irish folk songs!
- How many of us mist up with “How Great Thou Art!” or are stirred by “Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah!” or excited by “O Come, All Ye Faithful!”?

IV

At Elora United, Greg interviewed Betty Weinstein, our Music Director. She is in the process of becoming a Certified Music Practitioner. You can find out more about CMPs here: www.mhtp.org. This is a transcript of the interview.

What is a Certified Music Practitioner?

A CMP is a specially-trained musician who provides live acoustic music one-on-one at the bedside to help provide a healing environment. The CMP provides in-the-moment comfort care to the ill and dying.

What is your training like to become one?

First, there are 5 weekend modules of intensive classroom training, each highlighting a different aspect of the course. This is over a period of 8-12 months. Two books which we have read from the required reading list are discussed at each module. There is an exam after module 5 then a submission of a repertoire list covering all patient conditions (90 minutes in length). The student then organizes and arranges their practicum placement worth 45 hours of playing time, with at least 20 hours in a hospital setting. A graduation recording with 30 minutes of music needs to be submitted. Finally, I submit a summary of my experiences as a student and new graduate.

What is it like when you see a patient?

First off, I’d say it’s a humbling experience for the reason that the patient is allowing you to see them at a vulnerable time for them. Its also quite rewarding as some effects are quite immediate.

Usually beforehand I get information from the medical staff about their name and general medical condition (e.g., post-surgery, awaiting test results, etc.).

After I introduce myself and ask if I may play for them I do a visual assessment and then I usually breathe with them. Then I start playing simply and move into pieces that are

¹¹ L. Ole Bonde writes, “Music can be arousing, hypnotic, anxiety provoking, mind healing or shattering, a source of inspiration or spiritual vision – it is like a magic mirror enabling the listener, be it a client or a therapist, to find answers to deep existential questions.” Quoted in Williams, 24.

¹² [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/\(There%27ll_Be_Bluebirds_Over\)_The_White_Cliffs_of_Dover](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/(There%27ll_Be_Bluebirds_Over)_The_White_Cliffs_of_Dover)

¹³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karma_Chameleon

suitable to the patient's condition. I focus on the patient at all times to see if a change in the music is required. A session lasts anywhere from 5 to 20 minutes, usually the latter.

When I finish, I thank them for allowing me to play for them, if they are still awake. In the case of actively dying patients we ask the family if we may play. Hospital staff have been known to comment positively on the music when I finish a session.

V

Remember, "*music washes away from the soul, the dust of everyday life.*"

To David, we owe most of the Bible's songbook, the Psalms. For Jews and Christians, these pieces of poetry and prayer shape us. For our Presbyterian fore-bearers, the only music they used in worship was that to which Psalms were set. On the one hand, that was too limiting. On the other, the Psalms is a great place to start and finish.

Of the 150 Psalms, 73—nearly half—either say David wrote them, or are dedicated to him.

Many are about suffering and healing:¹⁴

Howlong, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? Howlong will you hide your face from me? Howlong must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? Howlong shall my enemy be exalted over me?

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest. (From Psalms 13 and 22)

Did David learn to cry out like that as he sat beside Saul in his suffering? Part of healing is crying out!

Did he then sing words like these?

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. (Psalm 23)

Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits, who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy. . . . (Psalm 103)

Blessed is the one who considers the poor! In the day of trouble the LORD delivers him; the LORD protects him and keeps him alive; he is called blessed in the land; you do not

¹⁴ Psalm 13:1-2; 22:1-2; 23:1-2; 30:2; 103:2-4; 41:1-3.

give him up to the will of his enemies. The LORD sustains him on his sickbed; in his illness you restore him to full health. (Psalm 41)

O LORD my God, I cried to you for help, and you have healed me. (Psalm 30)

V

“Music washes away from the soul, the dust of everyday life.”

I’ve heard it said that we Christians sing our theology. More than sermons or textbooks, we learn our faith through the songs we sing. That’s because music gets into the depths of us, far more than words alone.

We also sing healing. Healing in bodies, minds, and spirits.

The Bible reading tells us that when Saul was afflicted with a harmful spirit, Davey played. Saul was refreshed and made well. A spirit of health returned to him.¹⁵ Davey, became a life-giver. Even to Saul.¹⁶

Maybe his gifts were extraordinary. Still, the gift of music is something we all share. That’s good, because souls sure get dusty and need a gentle washing!

¹⁵ The word translated as “refreshed” (ESV) or, unfortunately, “relaxed” (CEB) in v. 23 is *râvach*, which is closely related for the word for spirit/breath (*rûach*).

¹⁶ Walter Brueggemann, First and Second Samuel (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1990), 126f.