

**Proper 20A, September 24, 2023**  
**Exodus 16: 2-15; Psalm 105: 1-6, 37-45;**  
**Philippians: 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16**  
**St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, Sunbury, PA**  
**Patrick Ishler, Guest Preacher**

*When in our music God is glorified,  
and adoration leaves no room for pride,  
it is as though the whole creation cried,  
Hallelujah!*

*In the Name of God~ Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer.  
Amen.*

“The one who sings prays twice. He that sings praise, not only sings, but also loves the One of whom he sings. In praise, there is the speaking forth of one confessing; in singing, the affection of one loving.” This quote, attributed to St. Augustine of Hippo, describes beautifully why we sing in corporate worship: as the Church, the

Body of Christ alive and at work in the world, we sing to  
and of the One who loves us all beyond measure.

In the beginning, as narrated in the book of Genesis,  
God speaks God's Word to *create* the universe and we  
hear that everything God makes is good. Although we  
have marred creation with the brokenness of our choices,  
the created order *still and will always sing* the goodness  
of God, and we experience God's indwelling Spirit and  
presence through all of our God-given senses. And in the  
*Incarnation*, that in-breaking of God into our world when  
God's Word was made flesh in the person of Jesus, we  
have a new lens for experiencing the fullness of God's  
love for God's people. There is a new depth of

relationship in how God seeks to communicate with God's creation, and endlessly new and life-giving ways for us to respond.

*“When we sing and make music together”,* says contemporary hymnwriter Carl P. Daw, Jr., *“we bring alive what it means for the Word to become flesh- the text and tune of the printed page are given life and breath; they cease to be merely an idea full of potential and become a present reality.”* The assembly sings to God believing that God is always present, wiping away all tears, feeding the people in places of wilderness, singing of God's grace and of God's action in ways not yet unimagined. Although COVID-19 forced us to

temporarily put aside our communal experience of singing in worship together, a place of tremendous grief and lament for many of us, we are now sharing in the joy of making music together again, an experience that brings the gift of God's mercy and love alive in both our bodies and souls in ways far beyond our own human understanding.

As people living and worshiping in this third decade of the 21st century, congregational song continues not only to be a powerful way through which we declare our faith, but also expresses that we are a people from many cultures and backgrounds who long to show our love for each other, the world, and our God. Our Hymnal 1982

and the supplemental hymnals offer us a rich and diverse banquet of service music and hymnody that feeds us with gospel, folk, Taizé, contemporary, historically significant hymns, and so much more. The variety and sheer magnitude of congregational song is really beyond our human comprehension- it reflects the long centuries of salvation history when people have gathered to sing their prayer and praise to God, as well as the very cultures which gave birth to this music. When the truth of our scriptural stories is made known to us not only in oral and written form but are also sung in the form of music, so often *it is the music* which brings the holiness of the living Word alive in our souls- enlightening us, transforming us, preparing us for our work in the world.

“Live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ”, says the apostle Paul in today’s epistle, “standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel.”

As human beings, and especially as faithful people who gather to worship and praise the God whom we seek to know ever more deeply, we are shaped not only by our human needs and longings but by our awareness of how God responds. We cry out our hunger and our fear that we will not have what we need to survive, as does the congregation of Israel in today’s reading from Exodus- and we are fed in ways that may surprise us. We complain when we see others getting more than we believe they

should, unable to trust fully in God's radical abundance even when we have been fairly given what has been promised to us -as we hear in today's Gospel. And the reverse of these two stories is when we do notice and sing to God all our remembrance of God's goodness and providence: "Sing to him", says today's psalm, psalm 105: "sing praises to him...Glory in his holy Name, let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice." We cry out- God responds- and so it goes, over and over throughout salvation history. God's justice, God's grace, God's radical generosity and abundance are so far beyond what we could imagine on our own- so lifegiving compared to our human choices and actions- that when we are not faithful to this, we are not being faithful to

God's dream for us and for all creation. In a way, music contains the fullness of our response to all this tremendous goodness of God: the musical texts of our tradition teach us- they sustain the weary with a word- they guide us towards paths of true and holy living, they remind us that we are surrounded by that great cloud of witnesses we cannot see but who are always just beyond the veil. And the act of making music together connects our human souls and bodies not only with each other but with the God who created us so that our most natural language should be that of praise, and our praise to be our great witness for all the world to hear and know. "Make his deeds known to the peoples," we sing in hymn 679 in our Hymnal 1982, "Tell out his exalted name. Praise the



Lord, who has done great things; all his works his might  
proclaim. *Zion, lift your voice in singing; for with you  
has come to dwell, in your very midst, the great and holy  
one of Israel!*”

I truly believe that if our music touches even just one  
person in our community, then we have done our own  
work of faithful discipleship- the work of the church-  
sharing God’s love with God’s people in this and every  
place. Think, my friends, how often we’ve been that one  
in need of what music can give us- when music has been  
the pathway that guides us back to God’s protection and  
care. Maybe it’s the Christmas music you listen to when  
you’re driving in the car, or when you’re singing those  
old familiar hymns that your grandmother taught you.

In today's collect we hear, "Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly; and even now, while we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure". Is not music so often the pathway that leads us to those things that will endure? Is it not a threshold- a thin place- where the goodness and abundance of God is so clearly revealed to us? There are few more powerful ways than music to share the Good News that God has always loved us and desired health and wholeness for us, fullness upon fullness beyond what we can even begin to imagine.

I leave you with some thoughts to ponder about how music has blessed you and nourished you on your

own spiritual journeys. What are your personal longings as they relate to music and singing- what kind of music feeds your soul most deeply and makes you feel that God is particularly close to you? Are there broken places that music and singing can help to heal and bless here in our beloved community of St.

Matthew's? What are your hopes- How can we- *together*- share the gift of music so that it comes alive in ways that bring God's grace and love ever more real in this time and in this place and in the world to come?

*Let every instrument be tuned for praise!  
Let all rejoice who have a voice to raise!  
And may God give us faith to sing always:  
Hallelujah! Amen.*