

Kailua Christian Church
Sunday, October 8, 2023
Message: "The Praise Song"
Rev. Irene Willis Hassan

Scripture:

Psalm 95:1-7

1 Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD;
let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation.
2 Let us come before him with thanksgiving
and extol him with music and song.
3 For the LORD is the great God,
the great King above all gods.
4 In his hand are the depths of the earth,
and the mountain peaks belong to him.
5 The sea is his, for he made it,
and his hands formed the dry land.
6 Come, let us bow down in worship,
let us kneel before the LORD our Maker;
7 for he is our God
and we are the people of his pasture,
the flock under his care.

John 5:1-9

5 Some time later, Jesus went up to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish festivals.² Now there is in Jerusalem near the Sheep Gate a pool, which in Aramaic is called Bethesda[a] and which is surrounded by five covered colonnades. 3 Here a great number of disabled people used to lie—the blind, the lame, the paralyzed. [4] [b]5 One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. 6 When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, “Do you want to get well?” 7 “Sir,” the invalid replied, “I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred. While I am trying to get in, someone else goes down ahead of me.” 8 Then Jesus said to him, “Get up! Pick up your mat and walk.” 9 At once the man was cured; he picked up his mat and walked.

Sermon - The Praise Song

A few weeks ago, I preached a message called “The Sad Song.” I talked about how sometimes when we’ve experienced tragedy, simply listening to the sad music of God calling to our souls is what we’re meant to do. We’re not meant to go straight to redemption in the wake of tragic loss; after all, Jesus spent 3 days dead before He was resurrected to new life. We’re meant to honor the space of Holy Saturday and sit in the grief a while, allowing God to unfold His sacred beauty into our hearts while we mourn.

The Sad Song is important. It functions to channel grief into a safe place. Sad songs help us build empathy and compassion. The message today is called the Praise Song, and there's a time and place for that music, too.

I've told you a little about my adverse teenage years. I unfolded a series of mishaps when I was 16 that landed me at a troubled girls' home in southern Louisiana called "The Journey Home". Every Sunday, the staff made us sit in the living room and listen to praise music for an hour. It was an uncomfortable affair of 20 teenage criminals sitting in a room together listening to upbeat music that felt wildly out of context for such a dark situation. Asking a bunch of kids who have been forced to grow up too quickly through trial and tragedy to happily belt out praise music is like asking a cat to get in a bathtub full of water. We probably would have preferred to listen to some angsty Nirvana songs or even some haunting Tchaikovsky than be subjected to triumphant tunes like "Lord I Lift Your Name on High" or "Amazing Love." Yet, all the music they played on Sunday morning at the Journey Home was the latter.

There was a reason they didn't let us listen to sad or angsty music during that time on Sundays. You see, a problem can develop with the Sad Song if we listen to it too long – it eventually becomes too familiar. The safety of that mournful music feels like a form of survival when it gets stuck on repeat. Safety, empathy, and compassion that arise from experiencing sadness are just some of the tools we need to get through life, but certainly not all of them. All that compassion and empathy with nowhere to go eventually implodes into bitterness when it becomes the only channel on our soul radios. The Journey Home knew that by the time we had gotten to their program, our soul radios had been listening to that Sad Song for a long time already; and this is exactly why they specifically only let us listen to Praise Songs on Sundays, instead of sad or angsty music that we preferred. There comes a time eventually when we need to let go of the Sad Song and move into the Praise Song so that the music doesn't eventually turn into the white noise of bitterness.

It's a hard switch though, because that Sad Song is so powerful. Grief can be all consuming, and the prospect of listening to new music feels impossible. You may have noticed I ask the question, "what brought you joy this week?" often. When I go to IHS, I ask this question to the homeless people living in the shelters – and their response, much of the time, is to angrily rail at me that there's nothing joyous about their situation and they carry on to name all the reasons that their lives feel insurmountable. I recognize that they still need the Sad Song and I don't try to change that, but after I get to know them for a while, I eventually ask them how long they've been listening to the Sad Song and if they're ready to switch their soul's radio station.

One of my favorite bible verses is John 5:1-5, when Jesus asks the complaining man at the pool if he wants to be made well. We've all met that sick man sitting at the well, making excuses about why he can't get into the pool. No one's helping me! People get in my way when I try to do it myself! It's exhausting trying to help someone change their radio station when they don't want to. Yet, Jesus doesn't offer to help him – he asks if he wants help at all. Do you want to be made well?

Like the Sad Song, the Praise Song doesn't offer help or a solution. In the message I delivered about the Sad Song, I talked about how music isn't understood by its logic, but instead music is understood by its beauty. We can understand the tone of a song in a foreign language without understanding any of the words. The same goes for the Praise Song. The Praise Song is an invitation to hope, rather than an instruction manual on how to do it ourselves. Because the Good News is we don't have to do it ourselves – God does it for us, if we only accept His invitation. God invites us to be made well in Praise Songs, and that is the invitation the Journey Home made every Sunday through that hour of music. Praise music invites us into something bold and innovative; it invites us to stand up and walk, to change and grow and be made new, which is something we have to do eventually to survive even when we feel like the survival is in the safety of the Sad Song.

The Praise Song invites us to surrender into the unknown. “Amazing love, how could it be?” literally asks how it's possible to change because it feels so foreign. “Lord I Lift Your Name on High” lets go of our ability to control our circumstances and hands it over to God's infinite wisdom and grace. The Praise Song invites us into handing our lives to God and letting go of what we thought was safe. It feels counterintuitive to surrender into the unknown, to be vulnerable, rather than conserve into a narrow tune of safety that validates what we already feel.

It feels counterintuitive, but science and history back up the Praise Song as the true form of survival. The Praise Song is essentially why humankind survived the Ice Age. 40,000 years ago, our early ancestors, the Homo Sapiens, outlived Neanderthals because we had a unique ability to be vulnerable and innovative. While Neanderthals were functioning in smaller, isolated groups that were predicated primarily on survival, Homo Sapiens displayed a heightened capacity for innovation and discovery. Homo Sapiens were willing to change the channel on their soul radios and it resulted in their evolutionary triumph. Handing their fate over to the Unknown saved the Homo Sapiens. Music itself was actually the tool early humans used to foster this willingness to be vulnerable, innovate, and face the unknown. Music served as a powerful tool for communication and strengthening bonds within groups. Through rhythm, melody, and song, early humans conveyed emotions, shared stories, and transmitted cultural values, laying the foundation for complex human interactions. This shared musical experience helped forge a collective identity and a sense of belonging, facilitating social cohesion and cooperation, ultimately contributing to the growth and advancement of Homo sapiens societies. Music literally saved us.

God uses music to direct our souls toward Him. God's Sad Song is safe, because it validates what we are feeling and experiencing. It's valuable. But God's Praise Song is innovative, in that it asks us to open ourselves to His changing story for us. Jesus asks if we want to be made well, and being made well is in the faith that things can and will be made new if we're willing to step into the unknown.

After several weeks of listening to Praise Music every Sunday, I felt a curious stirring in my heart. The music illuminated God's invitation, just as it did for the early humans. God's invitation is always open, and one Sunday at the Journey Home, I finally

accepted that invitation to be made well. I had absolutely no logical concept on how a carpenter 2,000 years ago could die to save my life; that didn't sound logical to me at all. But music illuminates beauty, not logic. The contagious joy of songs like "Amazing Love" and "Lord I lift Your Name on High", made total sense to my heart, even if it didn't make sense in my head yet. Through that music, I heard Jesus asking me if I wanted to be made well. Through the Praise Song, I finally answered yes and found myself standing up on my mat. And because of that experience, my life is forever changed.

Let's now turn to Praise Him together through music that connects us and lifts our hearts toward that which innovates and strengthens us to achieve beauty we could have never imagined.

Amen.