

Biblical Singing (Singing with the Spirit Sunday)
October 4, 2015 | Patrick Preheim & Anita Retzlaff

Patrick

In our bibles we have at least 321 English references to “song” or its various cognates (sing, song, singer, etc.,.). At 321 I stopped counting (all these come from a variety of Hebrew and Greek words: ψαλῶ, ὕμνος, רמז, מְזִמֹּר, שִׁיר, etc.,). This doesn’t include citations of music, musicians, or hymns which are also a part of the singing family. Oh sure, a goodly number of these musical allusions are rooted in worship but we also hear of party songs (Gen 31.27), triumphal songs, love songs (Cant. 1.1), drunken songs, pilgrim songs (Psalms 120-134), well-digging songs (Nu. 21.17), and other types of work songs (Is 5.1; 23.15; 27.2-5) (Briggs, Driver, Brown, A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament, p. 1010). Music makes work lighter and worship more profound. Why? It is about the hum, the buzz, the touch of music. Music, in work or worship, has the power to take us into an added dimension. Does anyone doubt?

“You’ll find plenty of studies on the productivity benefits [of music]. One says cows give more milk when serenaded. Another found that college students solve math problems more easily when listening to classical music (“the Mozart effect”). And a University of Illinois study concluded “listening to music may increase the output of employees in all types of work,” a 6.3% increase as compared with a no-music control group” (Pat DiDomenico in HR Soapbox (Aug 3, 2011). Why? Music, rightly applied, has the capacity to lift us beyond ourselves: more milk made, more problems solved, more widgets punched. And deeper worship offered. Yes, if it is true in the workplace how can such a parallel not be made to our life of worship? And I believe that the Apostle Paul and the religious tradition in which he was raised knew this long before those studies I referenced.

When Paul writes in 1st Corinthians 14.15 about singing with the mind and spirit, this word for singing (ψαλῶ) means “to move by a touch, to twitch; to touch, strike the strings or chords of an instrument” (The Analytical Greek Lexicon Revised (1977), edited by Harold Moulton, p. 441). We are God’s guitar, God’s sitar, God’s ukulele, or some member of the lute family who the Divine Spirit strums each time we worship with music. Solo work is nice, don’t get me wrong, but when we resonate together as a choir or congregation it is a heavenly symphony. Yes, Paul wrote, we are certainly to pray / verbalize (“προσεύξομαι” from προσεύχωμαι) our praise of God. And, Paul continued, we are to also buzz in our worship. For Paul this would have been nothing less than an extension to his Jewish understanding of worship, for at the very root of the term “Psalms” (מְזִמֹּר (Psalm) (רמז linguistic root)) is the simple word hum or murmur (BDB, p. 274). These definitions make me think of Paul’s words about prayer in “Romans” 8: the Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words (8.26). Using the allusion from the Ephesians reading, music helps us plumb the depths, rise to the heights, be filled with the fullness of God. This happens, in part, when we sing songs and hum the Psalms.

From this biblical treatment of “Psalms” and “song” I turn now to Anita and her reflections on the ways music has functioned within our tradition.

Anita

Mennonites love to sing! From all that we heard from those who attended the Mennonite World Conference in Pennsylvania in July the singing was transcendent; transformative. Mennonites around the world love to sing - different kinds of music from country to country but Mennonites love to sing. In Canada we have a solid tradition of singing and music in worship; congregational four-part harmony, instrumental accompaniment of varied kinds and a choral tradition that has nurtured many of us.

Music is our liturgy. In music we have the theological sign posts and artistic framework for the way in which we organize our worship and express our faith. Having studied in a Lutheran context where the term "liturgy" is used to describe the way worship is ordered and experienced I soon recognized that although we do not use all of the traditional elements of liturgy the way many mainline churches do our music serves to communicate the same things.

Liturgy literally means "the work of the people." We worship together praying, listening to God's word, giving thanks and going out into the world in service to the gospel of God. This is what we "do" in worship and we express much of this "work" or "action" through music and singing. We literally sing our faith. We sing our hope. We sing scripture and prayer and thanksgiving and mission. We pray along with preludes and postludes and offertories and special music. We understand more deeply the full extent of God's love when music carries us into that inexplicable experience of divine grace.

Through singing many of us learned of Jesus and it is through song and melody that many of us grieve our life's losses and mourn loved ones who are so dear. At the same time we have hymns that give us immense hope: "Come, come ye saints... all is well, all is well." "In the bulb there is a flower" "How great thou art" We have a rich heritage in singing that expresses the fullness of God's love in a very special way. We praise God with lips and voice, with ears and clapping hands; with dancing and tears. The means by which we praise God come to us through singing and musical expression. The words of a rousing hymn capture this beautiful truth:

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

How oft, in making music, we have found
A new dimension in the world of sound,
As worship moved us to a more profound
Allelujah!

Friends in Christ, let us sing for joy! God is good!