

18 December 2022

**Anatomy of a Festival: Singing**  
2 Chronicles 5:11-14

As we look back this month at the traditional festivals of the Jewish people, we occasionally encounter some of the people who were responsible for making those festivals happen. We read today from 2 Chronicles chapter 5, verses 11-14:

*<sup>11</sup>Now when the priests came out of the holy place (for all the priests who were present had sanctified themselves, without regard to their divisions), <sup>12</sup>all the Levitical singers, Asaph, Heman, and Jeduthun, their sons and kindred, arrayed in fine linen, with cymbals, harps, and lyres, stood east of the altar with one hundred and twenty priests who were trumpeters, <sup>13</sup>it was the duty of the trumpeters and singers to make themselves heard in unison in praise and thanksgiving to the Lord, and when the song was raised, with trumpets and cymbals and other musical instruments, in praise to the Lord,*

*'For he is good,  
for his steadfast love endures forever',*

*the house, the house of the Lord, was filled with a cloud, <sup>14</sup>so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the Lord filled the house of God.*

The Old Testament includes within its collection two different histories of ancient Israel, one in Samuel and Kings and the other one in Chronicles. The later one, Chronicles, is what many scholars call “the boring version.” It takes out all those interesting stories of the prophets, removes every unflattering detail about King David (“Adultery? Murder? I don’t know what you’re talking about!”) and replaces all that primarily with genealogies and details about temple worship. You have to be a pretty dull person, with a sad, geeky interest in details of ritual to appreciate Chronicles. I kind of like it.

In any case, once you’ve plodded through all the priestly genealogies and temple lists, you get a pretty good idea of the different roles that the priests and Levites held and which ones were most important. First were the priests themselves, responsible for the sacrifices. Then came the musicians – not as prestigious, but a *lot* more of them. Then came the gatekeepers, who had specific duties for the care of the sanctuary. You know who doesn’t appear in any of the lists? Preachers. Look at the passage we just read, which is taken from the description of the dedication of Solomon’s temple. Zero preachers, but a trumpet section of a hundred and twenty. And notice this, too: the priests get top billing in the sense that they are mentioned first, but the only people who are identified by name are the music directors: Asaph, Heman, and Jeduthan, who each led a different group of musicians – section-leaders, you might call them. Anybody can perform a ritual, like the priests. You just have to learn the steps and the right words to say at the right time. But not everyone can lead music. Not everyone can be an Asaph, Heman, or Jeduthan. These the irreplaceable leaders of temple worship: the musicians.

We’ve been talking this month about what constitutes a religious festival. Why do we have them? What are we supposed to get from them? What are the necessary elements? We’ve talked about preparation – all the big ones have a time set aside for preparation; every Christmas has its Advent, every Easter its Lent. We’ve talked about feasting, opening our table to others and breaking bread with friend and stranger alike. We’ve talked about giving gifts and why we

try to set aside our human selfishness at these times. And today, one more essential element of a festival: music. Coming into the presence of God nearly always has a soundtrack. Doesn't it? Every holy day has its associated music. And why is that?

The intersection of art and faith is something I've thought a lot about – going back to my dissertation, even – and so I could talk for a long time about the importance of music in worship. But that would defeat the purpose, wouldn't it? A lengthy sermon about music, preached while our choirs and ensembles wait, would be ... tone-deaf. So let me try to summarize. Sermons are not a bad thing. At their best, they engage our minds and direct our thoughts toward God. But knowing God is more than just having ideas about God. We are called to love God not just with our minds but with our hearts, beings, and strength. Music is a language of heart and being, and it communicates a different kind of knowledge of God. When we make music, we arrange the sounds of the world around us – the whistling of birds, the clanging of metal against metal and wood against wood, the hums and reverberations of the wind, the vibrations of strings and vocal chords – and when we have put those random sounds in a new order, we discover that we have created something larger and better than the separate parts. We have made meaning from mere sound. We have brought order out of chaos, in glorious imitation of the one who did that first.

This is why I have come to believe that music itself is a prayer, a reaching out to God. Not just so-called “sacred music” – by which we mean something like “music that we associate with religious words” – but all music. Whether it's written by Christians, people of other religions, or people of no religion at all. When someone is making beautiful music, that person is creating meaning and order out of chaos and in that way echoing God, whether they know it or not. This is why, when Jennifer slips a Beatles tune in as the postlude, I don't care. It is still a prayer waiting to be borrowed and raised to God by the listener.

And that's why we're here today, because this week we will celebrate one of our holiest festivals, the festival of Christ's incarnation on earth, and it is not enough just to talk about it. When God does something beyond comprehension, then words are inadequate to express our awe. Music, which speaks the language of a deeper kind of meaning, comes closer. And that's also why I'm going to stop talking now, while Ellesi speaks to us in a language that is beyond that of mere preaching.

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Final word: When I was in college, my grandparents lived closer to me than my parents did, so I spent a lot of weekends with them. One day, coming home from church with them, Grandpa was grumbling to himself about something, and then he asked, “Did you ever read anything about hand bells in the Bible? I didn't think so. I don't know why we have to have all that tinkling. It's just taking time away from the preacher!”

And Grandma replied, “Dr. Brown still gets his thirty minutes every Sunday. I time it.”

And *right there* is why we have music in our holy days and our worship. Because nobody's watching the clock when we speak the language of angels. So, we close with the prayer of music, as all our choirs and ensembles join, like the priests and Levites long ago, to lift our voices in praise together.