

St. David's Presbyterian Church  
St. John's, NL  
"How Does Music Become Sacred?"  
Dr. J. Dent

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The Sacred Side of Jazz Sunday

Since the dawn of humanity, music has done much to soothe our souls. We are attracted to well placed tones and tunes. Like we read about King Saul, we too from ancient times have found refuge in music and musical styles of all kinds. If we were to hear King David's lyre, harp or guitar, we would all be amazed at its simplicity and Near Eastern quality. And we might even connect to its musicality, even though these people lived well before 1000 BC, over three thousand years ago.

The music that attracts us connects us in ways deeper than words. Although certainly the words put to music are important. The earliest connections of music have to do with worship. This was true for the Jewish community and nation, and with many of the other nations as well. Music was a way of expressing yourself and touching others. Music was first meant to touch your higher power, your God. This was certainly true of the musical shepherd boy who became king, King David. He expressed the depths of his emotions in song and his songs or Psalms have been the music of the Jewish community and for Christians for millennia. He exhorted his people to "sing a new song to the Lord." And so we are here centuries and millennia later, at the ends of the earth, compared to where human cultures began, singing, enjoying music and worshipping.

Today when we use the term "sacred music," we think of Handel's *Messiah* or various masses by the great classical composers. The reality is that any music used to worship God is sacred music. Sacred simply means that it is set apart for the purpose of pleasing God. Secular is the opposite where we use music without reference to or perspective from God. But any particular style of music can be used as sacred music, at least from my point of view. So last year I played a number of clips at Easter to illustrate this point, including folk and rock (although the rock of the 70s I played is probably today called "country") and rap and techno and some African spiritual and jazz and many other styles of music were used as sacred music, that is, to worship God.

When we worship God with music, we are connecting with the most ancient traditions of humanity. I believe music is well used in the service of God.

God who created life and music and longs for us to know peace, desires our best. Many of you are familiar with the church and church lingo that would say this to you in a way you completely understand. There are others who are visiting and are most welcome. We enjoy the gift of music together. We pause for a moment to remember to give thanks for the gift of life and many human gifts.

We know that this city was dedicated to St. John the Baptist, the basilica and the cathedral both bear his name. I read the passage from Luke 7 to let you know one of the few places in the Gospels where music is mentioned. Jesus said it was hard to know how to speak to people and make yourself understood. His cousin, John the Baptist, was an abstainer and a prophet, a man who gave his life for his faith, yet people didn't listen to him because he was a fanatic. Jesus, on the other hand, did enjoy a party and hung out with 'sinners,' and people didn't take him seriously because he was considered a drunkard and a low life. Jesus quotes a well known saying, "we played the pipe for you and you didn't dance, we sang a dirge and you didn't cry. In other words, we tried to get your attention and your response, but it didn't work. God sent the best he had. He tried to get your attention with what you were interested in, but you weren't interested.

God often gets our attention when our lives take a turn for the worst. He gets our attention when relationships don't work out. He gets our attention when our health and our loved one's health doesn't go the way we expect. Jesus draws us to himself to remind us that the gift of life isn't as long or exactly as we had planned.

I don't know all the reasons why some suffer immensely and others hardly do so. I don't know why some are so easy to love and others so difficult. At times, I wish I knew why; other times, I don't. Family doesn't turn out the way we expect. Friends don't act in ways we can predict.

But in the midst of all of our life difficulties and confusion, we can turn to music and we can turn to God. We find a refuge there. We find some semblance of peace there. We find the serenity we need there. And when we take the time and make the quiet space, we learn again about this gift of life.

Music is about finding our primary relationships; first, with God; then within ourselves. It is a wonderful gift. And this city is very blessed in the number and quality of persons with musical gifts.

There are so many gifts in this life. Sometimes we don't pause and give thanks for those gifts, because we have expectations for something better or different. Sometimes people hurt us, leave us, or are mean to us.

But we can go back to God. We can use spiritual music and simple instrumental music of all kinds to make that spiritual journey back. I can't tell you exactly how you will get back. But I do know within our Christian tradition, it is important to simply say "yes" to Jesus, "yes" to God, "yes" to the gift of life, even if we have lots of confusion about lots of parts of life.

I have decided to follow Jesus is not just a children's song. Southern black gospel comes out of the suffering and spirituality of those who were badly abused. In fact, much of today's music, urban, jazz and blues, pop, you name it, has its roots in that suffering and spirituality.

So bring your whole self to God. Sing your song to the Lord. Say "yes" to Jesus Christ; what he has done for you, and choose anew to follow God.

Let us pray.