

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Called to Hope"
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Much of human experience throughout history has been suffering and despair. Even the Bible starts out with a good creation, good people, then bad choices, expulsion from the garden that provided everything needed, then hard work and pain in families, physical pain, culminating in the emotional pain of the first family seeing their one son murder the other. Nevertheless, they make it through and survive. And such is the stories of many Newfoundlanders, they made it through, with many hardships and survived. Yet the sense of suffering and despair is vaguely in our emotional background throughout all this. Some of you carry this very deeply within yourselves.

The question of how they made it through, and the continuing question of how we make it through today, although almost all of us have plenty to eat, a safe place to stay, plenty of clothes, yet it is in the emotional, the psychological, the physical pain which we carry where we struggle today, sometimes consciously, sometimes unconsciously. How do we make it through? How do you respond to the murder, break-ins, drug and other addictions, assaults, home invasions, theft, etc. that we often hear on the news, if not everyday, almost everyday? How do you respond to those who get sick, terminally ill, or chronically ill at all ages and in all circumstances, seemingly randomly? How do you respond to the abuse, the unkindnesses, the everyday hurts that come your way, whether from family or friends long ago, or day by day today?

Many of us struggle with despair. We feel it right below the surface of our lives. We deny it. We medicate it. Sometimes we give in to it. But we also do things to fight it, to push it away.

One of the things we do, I do, is music. If I have an obsessive thought, or a high stress day, I can go to music. God has given us a great gift in music. Music speaks to us in ways that words do not. Jubal is mentioned in Genesis 4:21 as being the first one in recorded history to play both stringed instruments and pipes, that is, wind instruments. Thousands of years have greatly developed our possibilities of sound production, culminating

perhaps, in the digital synthesizing of the last few decades. But much of the purpose of the music, at least in the Bible is connected to worship.

This is the sacred side of music. Music is meant to connect us to God. God helps us fight the despair. More on that in a minute. Many of us are familiar with the rhythm and blues roots to rock and roll, popular music and jazz, to some degree. Many who were founders of these styles of music owe their musical background to the church, to gospel music, and even if the blues can be traced to brothels, nevertheless, most of the musicians learned their music in church. The suffering of the African Americans as slaves produced a profound experience which then is communicated to God in music. This permeates their life, becomes mainstream in North America and touches us all. I suppose the urban suffering with gangs and violence in part informs the urban music scene of rap and hip-hop that many of us don't understand and simply ignore.

There are connections in music that keep us alive and give us hope. Jazz has done this for me. Some of the abuse as a smaller child that I suffered at my father's hands, and my brothers' was offset by the joy of sax, playing the saxophone. Now that joy wasn't always joy either because you know how all musicians start out. [Play a major scale.] It doesn't sound like this right away. [Play jazz run.]

In fact, I remember in high school, not being able to play any solo that I thought was any good. Perhaps I hadn't understood the music theory of blues scales, etc. Perhaps I was just too nervous to play well. It took the encouragement of a charismatic/Pentecostal pastor in Cornwall, Ontario in the early 90s to help me take the instrument out of the closet and into the church, for worship. So for me, I am finding jazz's place in the original context for the purpose of music, which is worship. I hope you are doing the same.

Because when we connect the original purpose of music, and its side benefit of inducing hope, we have a powerful combination for healing. And I believe music heals. Or should I say, God heals, using music as a media. I just met yesterday with a musician who has recorded a CD just for this purpose of healing.

Paul in Romans 8 speaks strongly of our experience of suffering in this life. He goes even farther than personal suffering to the notion of all creation suffering, groaning under the brokenness inherent in this life. Everything in

this life has been affected by human mismanagement of the earth, of relationships to one another, and rebellion toward God. Paul says there will be a time not only when you and I can experience life like it had been originally designed in the next life, but also “all creation will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into freedom and glory...” (Romans 8:21) This is a passage of hope as we trust in God. Of course, many are skeptical about this idea of this life not being the only one. I understand this. It is difficult to imagine, let alone trust in the reality of a life coming that will straighten out all the injustices, abuses and degradations of this life. But then as Paul says, “hope that is seen is no hope at all...we hope for what we do not yet have...” (Romans 8: 24-25)

The Scriptures call us to hope, based on a relationship to God that also brings hope that there is more than what we can see now. There is hope that we do not end up in a box or an urn and that is it. There is hope that every person who thinks they can get away with awful crimes and inhumanity, whether in the church or not, will receive justice.

And through it all, I have to say there is another source of hope for me. Because relationship to God in Jesus Christ is the foundation for my hope. But we have many sources of hope. Gratitude is one of them. Encouraging words is another. Honesty is another. Gardening is another.

Jazz is one as well. Now this is a little hard to explain, to myself, let alone to you. But let me try. I shared with you at Easter that my mother who was born in the early 1920s remembers the first time she heard a live big band. She was there to dance with a date. All she remembers was that the sound was so big, so good, that instead of dancing, those present would simply stop and stare.

I think I've had that same kind of relationship with jazz. Not necessarily stopping and staring, but rather being soothed, not so much like a soother in a baby's mouth, but rather like an ointment or a massage. Something hits the core of me when I listen to jazz. Now I can't say this happens all the time. But it happens often in both listening and playing. It is a wonderful gift. I trust you also have some experience of the enjoyment of jazz, as with many other types of music. Sometimes we experience the various styles of music competing with one another, even going to war with one another. They were never meant to compete with one another. Each is to be received, and enjoyed, if possible.

And as we receive the beauty of what jazz and other musical forms have to offer us, we can receive back at least a little hope. Hope that there is more. Having hope that we can have relationship with God, and that relationship can change in positive ways, in ways that we cannot change ourselves.

So if I improvise, I improvise to the Lord. If I stay silent, I stay silent before the Lord. But in all things, I receive the gift as it is offered me. I try to use my gifts. I trust you will use yours, in relationships, in honesty, in gratitude, in kind words, in jazz.

Let us pray.