

**These Windows Can Speak**  
**Part 8: A Sacrifice of Praise**  
**In Honour of the Chancel Choir**  
**Text: Hebrews 13:15**  
**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**  
**29 August 2010**

On the evening of October 23, 1958, the ground rumbled deep beneath the mining town of Springhill, Nova Scotia. Nearly 3 miles down, the Number 2 mine of the Dominion Steel and Coal Corporation had experienced a catastrophic collapse. Too much greed and too little concern for miner safety had led to the extraction of too much coal, leaving too little support for the mine's tunnels. Like intricate lines of dominos, it all came crashing down.

75 men were killed. But trapped in the bowels of the earth, 19 men were still alive. For 12 days they held out, not knowing if they would be rescued, not even knowing if anyone was still looking for them. You know what kept them going? Singing. Hymns and sea shanties, Celtic melodies and bar tunes, folk songs and spirituals; they sang every song they knew. And when they'd sung them all, they started all over again. Finally, on Saturday, November 1, a rescue team made contact with them. And on Sunday – the Lord's Day – they saw the light of day for the first time in nearly two weeks.

Music is a powerful thing. It has sustained trapped miners and lonely cowboys; frightened soldiers and desperate slaves. And perhaps music is at its most powerful when it is an offering of praise to God. You might be trapped deep within a coal mine, but you're still alive, so you praise God. You might be living in a new country, far away from family with three or four kids driving you crazy, but your kids are healthy and you've got food to put on the table, so you sing praise to God. You might be having a real bad week, and by Thursday night you're bone-tired, but you haul yourself to choir practice anyway and the anthem that you're working on is powerful and inspiring and you find yourself singing praise to God.

Music is a sacrifice of praise. Through music we heed the advice of the author of the Letter to the Hebrews: "Let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name" (Hebrews 13:15). The Church has been doing that for 2,000 years. And our Jewish forbearers offered such praise before that. The Psalms were the hymnbook of the Jews, and so many of the psalms have become Christian hymns as well. We sang Psalm 100 as our opening hymn this morning. In the Bible, it reads this way:

"Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come into God's presence with singing. Know that the Lord is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are God's people, and the sheep of his pasture. Enter God's gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to God, bless his name. For the Lord is good; God's steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations."

This psalm which frequently has been set to music is the scriptural basis for our window this morning, the Knox Choir Window, over here on the southeast side of the Sanctuary. It's also pictured on the back of your bulletin. It depicts two choir members in full-throated praise to their Creator. Around them are swirls of musical staves and trumpet, backed by the pipes of our mighty Casavant organ. For nearly 162 years choristers and congregation alike have raised their voices in song in this place; offering their sacrifice of praise to their sovereign God.

It wasn't always the case. Some of our Presbyterian forbearers loathed singing; or, at the very least, they were highly suspicious of it. For several centuries most of the churches of the Reformed tradition, which is that branch of Protestantism which traces its heritage back to the Swiss reformers John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli, most of the Reformed churches had either no music at all in their worship or restricted themselves to the Psalms: often sung acapella and in a rather plain and unexciting way. Where we sang this morning:

Make a joyful noise, all the earth!  
Worship your God with gladness.  
Make a joyful noise, all the earth.  
Come to this place with a song!

They sang:

All people that on earth do dwell,  
Sing to the Lord with cheerful voice,  
Him serve with mirth, his praise forth tell;  
Come ye before him and rejoice.

Same psalm. In fact, the name of the hymn tune which the choir just sang is Old 100<sup>th</sup> because, being based on Psalm 100, it was Hymn # 100 in the old Scottish Psalter of 1650, a version of which was probably the first hymn book here at Knox Presbyterian Church in the 1840's and '50's.

Now of course you don't *have* to sing it in the downcast way that the choir just did. It can also sound like this...

*Here the first verse of Old 100<sup>th</sup> is repeated, with far more energy.*

But no proper Scots Presbyterian would sing it *that* way. It sounds so beautiful and lusty that you might find yourself falling in love with the music; maybe even falling in love with the sound of your own voice! That would be idolatry because you would be worshipping the music, or worshipping *yourself*, rather than worshipping God. That's why those early Presbyterians were so afraid of singing: they feared that through the power of song, Christian worship would descend into musical idolatry. Quite the contrast to our Methodist forbearers, who *loved* to sing. Some of the best songs in Protestant hymnody were written by Methodist co-founder Charles Wesley. Hymns like:

O for a thousand tongues to sing  
My great Redeemer's praise,  
The glories of my God and King,  
The triumphs of God's grace.

Where Calvin and Zwingli had real fears of music, John Wesley, the other co-founder of Methodism, advised his followers to "Sing lustily, and with good courage!"

Now the Swiss reformers had a point. One *can* get carried away with singing. After my very first Sunday here at Knox I caught some flack from one of our members who listened to the service on tape because during the hymns all she could hear was this one voice blasting out the bass part! I learned to turn off my mike after that. Yes, there are some risks with singing, but to radically tone down church music or eliminate it altogether because of those risks is akin to throwing out the baby with the bath water. It's a bit like the legendary Ohio State football coach, Woody Hayes, who had little use for the forward pass. That's a play in which the quarterback throws the ball to one of his team mates who may be way down the field. Woody use to say that if you put the ball up in the air like that, three things can happen, two of which are bad: the ball won't be caught, it will be caught by the other team, or – the one good thing – your receiver way down the field *might* catch it. The forward pass is one of the most exciting and productive plays in football, but Woody wouldn't use it because of the risks involved. Well, keeping the ball on the ground worked for Ohio State 40 years ago, but any team which fails to use the forward pass these days is not likely to win many football games. You have to risk the incomplete pass or the interception in order to experience the glory of the completed pass, the run down the field, the touchdown! And you have to risk somebody getting carried away with the music in order to experience the glory of worshipping God with a song.

It helps to remember that music is a gift from God. I don't care how good your voice is, how skilfully you can play an instrument, what kind of incredible composer you might be: it's not about you. There are probably some opera divas who don't want to hear that. It's not about you. If you have a gift for music, God gave you that gift. If you can inspire others with your singing or playing, it is God to whom the praise is directed; not you, but God. If it's a sacrifice of praise, then you're giving it away. Not calling attention to yourself, but giving it away as an act of worship. Jesus said, "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted" (Luke 14:11) and that's just as true of those who are musically gifted as it is of anyone else.

A week ago Friday I met the great Canadian opera singer, Ben Hepner: great big man; deep, profound, wonderful tenor voice; famous throughout North America and the world: humblest guy you'd ever meet. He lives right here in Agincourt in a house not unlike yours or mine. Just a friendly, funny, down-to-earth guy. When I first saw him I didn't realize who he was because he was running past me with his good clothes under his arm, heading for the men's room; just like anyone else who arrives almost late for a wedding. God has gifted him with a wonderful voice. And God has gifted *you* in some way: if not with a

good voice then maybe a good mind, or a creative spirit, or an unusual capacity to help others, or the ability to teach, or administrative skill or whatever. God has gifted each of us. We are called to offer that gift back to God in humble service. Not in a way that will call attention to ourselves, but as a faithful sacrifice of praise.

Those trapped miners who encouraged themselves with song so many years ago were singing the benediction to coal mining in Springhill. They never reopened that Number 2 mine. Indeed, coal mining is pretty much a thing of the past in Nova Scotia. But the song continues. The coal miners continue to offer their sacrifice of praise. They're called Men of the Deep: former miners who know how tough life can be; but they know as well of spirits both human and divine that are tougher still. So they sing in concert halls from coast to coast to coast throughout this great land: their miners hats on, their lamps burning, their voices raised in praise to a spirit which is deeper than the deepest mine, tougher than the toughest rock, and stronger even than death. Kind of like a group of tough shepherds out in a field near Bethlehem: singing glory to God in response to the songs of angels; offering a sacrifice of praise that God would shine a light even on them; that God would come to dwell even with the likes of them. A God who has come to dwell even with the likes of you and me. When you think about how good God has been to each and every one of us, how good God has been to *all* of us, you can't help but make a joyful noise! Amen.