

GOD ABOVE THE FLOOD¹
Psalm 93
A Communion Meditation by Thomas R. McKibbens
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Not every church has a Music and Arts Weekend. That is worth noting because we are prone to think of our religious faith in terms of words. One of the tasks of music and arts is to remind us otherwise. Sometimes our words are fragile and God's silence is overwhelming. Our words crash against God's silence.

Barbara Brown Taylor, in trying to describe preaching, said that to preach is to "toss the fragile net of our words over the bone-melting music of God." What a turn of phrase! But it is a good phrase to use on Music and Arts Sunday.

I

God must love music because there is so much of it in creation. The birds sing their songs, the trees wave their arms, the waves clap their hands, and even the whales in the sea sing their melodies. We sing a lot in church because music connects us to something deep inside.

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What kind of music pleases God? Surely God likes classical music! How could God not like the *Hallelujah Chorus* or *Sheep May Safely Graze*? Do you think God is a fan of R&B? Of Blues? What about country music? Or Bluegrass? What about Rock & Roll or Ragtime or Raggae? What about Gospel or Jazz or Callipso or Rap?

The psalms could be any of the above. We don't know what kind of music was used to sing the psalms. We do know some of the titles of the tunes they used, but the music itself has been lost to history. What we know for sure is that biblical faith is and always has been a singing faith. They sang because they knew deep down that music has a strange power that reaches deep into our souls and stirs up something.

There is a scene in Alex Haley's *Roots* in which Kunta Kinte is lying on the dirt floor of his slave cabin. The horrors of slavery have nearly eliminated any memory of his native Africa. He has forgotten what it is to be free. But then, in the night, he hears a woman singing. She is singing a song from Africa, and its melody awakens long suppressed memories of his home. He remembered who he was.

This is the "bone-melting music of God." For some of us it is the sound of a hymn that reminds us who we are. No matter how far we have moved in

our journey of faith, the sound of some particular music suddenly reminds us who we are and where we have been. What is it for you?

The Old Rugged Cross?

His Eye Is On the Sparrow?

Amazing Grace?

Precious Lord, Take My Hand?

Or could it be some camp chorus like *Do Lord, O Do Lord, O Do Remember Me?*

For me it is a gospel song, usually sung as a solo, that begins with the words: *The love of God is greater far than tongue or pen can ever tell; it goes beyond the highest star, and reaches to the lowest hell.* The third stanza of that song was originally written in Aramaic by a Jewish musician who was imprisoned in an insane asylum in the year 1050. When he died in prison, these words were found written on the wall of his cell:

*Could we with ink the ocean fill,
And were the skies of parchment made,
Were every stalk on earth a quill,
And every man a scribe by trade,
To write the love of God above,
Would drain the ocean dry,
Nor could the scroll contain the whole,
Though stretched from sky to sky.*

If that is insane, we could use more of it.

I don't know about you, but I find it quite moving that a Christian song would adopt the words written on the walls of a prison cell by a Jewish prisoner considered insane nearly 1,000 years ago! Whatever that prisoner's name was, and whatever religious tradition he held, we share with him the belief that was expressed by the writer of Psalm 93: that God still reigns above the floods! Whenever you see a reference to floods in the Bible, it is almost always a symbol for unpredictable catastrophe, heart-stopping disasters, fearful and chaotic events that leave us stunned and doubting that there anything predictable in this world. The cry of the psalmist is never out of date:

*The floods have lifted up, O Lord,
The floods have lifted up their voice;
The floods lift up their roaring!*

Of course they do; it is part of the human condition. Ask those whose homes were destroyed by the tornado in Yazoo City; ask the citizen soldier whose leg is blown off by a roadside bomb; ask the neighbor who just received bad test results; ask a shrimper in south Louisiana.... The floods still *lift up their roaring*, as the psalmist wrote.

But in the midst of this psalmist's flood that swept over his life, a song came to him. Perhaps it was a tune from his childhood. Perhaps he had sung it a thousand times growing up, but only now when the flood *lifted up its roaring* did the deep truth of that song center him.

Perhaps he began to hum it at first, but then he started a full-throated singing:

*The Lord is king, he is robed in majesty;
The Lord is robed, he is girded with strength.*

It no longer mattered to him how loud was the voice of the flood or how fearful was its roaring, the reality of that song strengthened his soul:

*More majestic than the thunders of mighty waters,
More majestic than the waves of the sea,
Majestic on high is the Lord!*

In other words, no matter what he was facing, God reigns!

Translate that into our day, and the message is clear: when we are overpowered by the roaring of problems, God reigns above the flood! When we are fearful of the roaring of time and we know that our earthly time is almost up, God reigns! When we are distressed about the economy or politics or the environment or relationships gone sour or unemployment or the suffering of those we love, God reigns!

III

Over the long centuries since Jesus first hosted the meal we now call the Lord's Supper, countless people have come to this table confident that somehow in the bread and wine the music of God will be heard again. No amount of eloquence from a preacher can do it; but the quiet memory of Jesus' life and suffering can. When the floods of life are raging, we come to this table to be reminded again that on the eve of his greatest struggle and his most fearful challenge, Jesus took ordinary bread and wine and made it a sacrament for all time.

And lo and behold, when facing the raging waters of betrayal and hatred and suffering and death, he led his friends in nothing less than a song. The scripture says, *When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.*²

How about that! They tossed away their fragile words for the "bone-melting music of God."

² Matthew 26: 30 and Mark 14: 26.