

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, December 24, 2023

This morning we continue our Advent worship series, entitled A Weary World Rejoices. We're going to read from the Gospel of Luke, the first chapter, towards the end of that chapter, verses 67 through 79. This is a part of scripture that is often referred to as Zechariah's Song. So earlier we've...perhaps y'all are familiar with Mary's Song, and we get to hear now the song of the father of John the Baptist, who sings prophetically for us, actually, this morning; and we're going to learn together a bit about the power of singing, particularly as we wait with expectation for the coming of Christ amongst us. So we'll read from Luke 1, beginning in the 67th verse, but before we do, let us join our hearts in prayer. Let's pray together.

Gracious and loving Spirit, fall fresh upon us this morning.
Fall fresh and quiet us that we might hear your word, and that in our hearing we might respond to your grace and your love and your hope. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, God, our Rock and our Salvation.
Amen.

Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his child David, as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness in his presence all our days. And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give his people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins. Because of the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to shine upon those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen.

Cliff Johnson is a member of Idlewild. You might not see him all the time here because he and his wife, Lee, live down in Mississippi. They have a place here, and they're up here every once in a while. Cliff directs the MacArthur Justice Center at the University of Mississippi Law School. We were spending some time together a couple of weeks ago, and he was telling me about this trip that he had facilitated for legal scholars from across our country, justice workers who came to Memphis to learn about what that work can look like in their particular context. He told me about the wonderful places that he took this group in our fair city. He also told me about this, uh, this playlist that he had created on Spotify. He shared it with me—MacArthur in Memphis. He learned in his research of music in the city something that many of you probably know; but I, as a newer resident to Memphis, did not know—that our city is the most mentioned city in the history of music. Y'all probably know that. Over a thousand times the city of Memphis is mentioned in popular music. It...it laps the next, you know, the second place city. And so he

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shared this playlist with me, and we sat together and just listened to some of the music and reflected on how our city is credited with birthing rock and roll and also the blues, and for the ways in which this city has been an incubator for creators for a very, very long time, and the ways in which those different forms of music touch different parts of our souls. Not just that, but they actually allow the artist to express emotions that words really on their own cannot capture. There is some sort of alchemy that happens when words are put to music that transforms them and gives them power. Cliff said at the end of his time with this group of scholars from across our country, they were on the roof of the Peabody looking out at the city, and one of them leaned in and said to Cliff, "Do Memphians know what y'all have here? Do you know the richness of this place that you call home?" We read a lot and we see a lot and we experience a lot as people who live here; but when people from outside of this place come, they see its uniqueness, its authenticity. When they sit in the blues clubs or they go and they see live music anywhere, they feel an energy in this place that they do not feel in other places. Cliff and I were talking about the potential power that we have in our city, power that is often made known when words are put or become lyrics, and those lyrics give voice to the emotions that we can scarcely express otherwise. I remember as a child Marc Cohn's song, Walking in Memphis. Y'all know it. We all know it, but growing up in Greenville, South Carolina, not even knowing where Memphis, Tennessee, was, all I knew was that that song made me feel a certain way, a...a sort of...of melancholy, but also encouragement. I don't know. I didn't know what Union Avenue was. I didn't know what it meant to walk 10 feet above it. I had no idea. But what I knew was that when I heard Marc's voice, something within me shifted. Song has the ability to paint an image in our minds and to express a feeling from our souls that mere words cannot. On this fourth Sunday of Advent, this day when we will celebrate not only the Sunday of love, but also the coming of our Messiah, we are placed at the end of the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke, and we get to hear the song of a father. We know earlier, that upon hearing about the birth, or the pending birth, of his son, Zachariah is struck silent. And when that silent veil is lifted from him, the only appropriate response that he can muster is a song. So Zachariah sings of God's favor and God's forgiveness. He sings of God's rescue and God's redemption. He sings of memory and mercy, of covenant and of calling. And if we pay attention to his singing, then our hearts might be shaped with the vision that he has for the world that is about to be. "Because of the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us to shine upon those who sit in darkness in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." If this was a song that was on a Spotify playlist, I'd probably rewind 15 seconds and hear verses 78 and 79 again, and then do it again, and then do it again, and then do it again, because this image of the tender mercy of God allowing a dawn from on high, or enabling a dawn from on high, to break forth, one that is going to shine light into darkness, even those who are on the verge of death, one that is going to guide our feet not 10 feet above the street just outside our Sanctuary but into the way of peace. That is the sort of song that, I'm not sure about you, but it's the sort of song I want to have on repeat. So in some ways it's a travesty that we only get about 4 hours to sit with this song before we shift our hearts and our minds to celebrating Christmas Eve. It does strike me though that in this season of growing darkness in our world, and I not speaking simply of the division and strife and war that we are seeing although I am speaking of that, but also of the shrinking days in which we live when the sun begins to go down about 4:15 in our fair city. It's

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interesting to me that the author of this song, the one who brings it to us, would speak of light language in a season of growing darkness. If we are to ask ourselves how in this season of Advent a weary world might rejoice, then we might take our lead from Zachariah. Instead of remaining silent we might choose to join our voices in song. If you're coming to the 3:00 or the 5:00 or even the 11, you'll get the chance to sing today the glory of God. It's actually a beautiful opportunity we have to join our voices. I get to sit up here every Sunday, and I know, I'm not not judging you, but I know that many of you when you have your hymnals open are singing with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your energy, okay, and others are not. That might be because someone told you at some point in time that your voice wasn't as beautiful as other people's voices. If they did, I'm sorry they lied to you, or it might be because you're...you're afraid for the person beside you that you don't know all that well to hear you make a joyful noise to the Lord. But here's the thing, people of God, if we all raised our voices with joyous celebration every single Sunday, no one would hear the missed notes. All that we would hear is the people of God speaking of mercy and memory, the people of God speaking of covenant and calling, the people of God speaking of favor and forgiveness, of rescue and redemption. That is all that we would hear, and the person beside you wouldn't care if you missed a note. Singing, it turns out for us, not only expresses emotions that can't be expressed otherwise, but it is also a privilege that we get. It was a privilege for Zachariah. He had been struck silent by the spirit of God. When he was given voice again, he knew what a gift it was. I wonder if we appreciate the voices that we've been given by God. I wonder if we understand the privilege that it is to sing. A friend of mine shared a story recently about Beverly Sills. Maybe some of you know. Beverly is the longtime soprano soloist at the Met Opera in New York. A middle school girl who idolized Mrs Sills and her talent received a birthday gift from her parents for a Saturday matinee at the Met to see Beverly Sills perform. The parents and their daughter got in line after the matinee ended to get Beverly Sills' autograph. When Mrs. Sills took a lot of time talking with their little girl about her singing and the proper care that she needed to take of her voice, the father became a little nervous that they were taking too much of Mrs. Sill's valuable time, so he said to his daughter, "Honey, we better get going. Mrs. Sills has to sing tonight." Beverly shot back, "No, I don't have to sing tonight." The father persisted. "Mrs. Sills, it's right here in the program—Beverly Sills, featured soloist, tonight." Beverly insisted, "No, I don't have to sing tonight." Before the father could protest again, Mrs. Sills said, "Don't you understand I don't have to sing tonight. I get to sing tonight. Do you have any idea what a privilege it is to be a featured soloist at the Metropolitan Opera, and for people to come and hear you sing? It is a privilege beyond words." We don't have to sing when we gather for worship. We get to sing, beloved. And if a weary world, a world that knows darkness, a world that knows division, if that weary world is to rejoice then, perhaps, it must begin with the people of God recognizing the privilege and the purpose of the voices that they have been given, to sing joy into weariness, light into darkness, hope into despair, incarnation...incarnation into division.

Here's the thing, beloved. We have the privilege of singing as Zachariah did of the hope and possibilities of God in the world. Perhaps it is the only thing that will draw us back into the light. But know this, beloved, this morning if you are too weary to sing, we will sing for you. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.