

“Then Sings My Soul”

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East Cobb United Methodist Church
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Scriptures: Psalm 98 (*The Message*)

Prayer

It has been said the music is the language of the spirit. It opens the secret of life bringing peace, abolishing strife. (Kahil Gilbran). Plato said that music and rhythm find their way to the secret places of the soul. Psalm 98:1 says, “O sing to the Lord a new song” (NRSV), or as *The Message* translation reads, “Sing God a brand new song!” Few in the history of the church have done more to make that happen than the man whose contribution we honor today.

Charles Wesley was born 300 years ago this year. He was the younger brother of John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement. But some of you know what it’s like to be a younger brother. Charles always seemed to be in the shadow of his big brother. They were 4 years apart in age, but their lives paralleled one another in many ways. At Oxford, it was Charles who started the first Holy Club, but John soon joined and became its leader. They were both ordained Anglican priests. They came to Georgia together. In 1738, John had his heart strangely warmed hearing the preface to Romans being read at a meeting on Aldersgate Street, but few of us realize that Charles had a similar experience within three days of his brother’s. They disagreed on some theological points, yet they worked together to reshape the role of the Church in English and American society. John became the great preacher and orator, while Charles – also a great preacher – became best known for his hymns. He was inducted into the Gospel Music Hall of Fame in 1995!

There are 56 of Wesley’s hymns and 14 of his poems and responses in *The United Methodist Hymnal*. All of the music we used in the service this morning was Charles Wesley’s. You may not recognize many of them, but what would Christmas be without “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing?” And we cannot envision an appropriate celebration of the resurrection of the Lord without “Christ the Lord Is Risen Today” at Easter. These Wesley hymns are well-known and revered across the Christian world. “O, For a Thousand Tongues to Sing” traditionally has been the first hymn in every Methodist hymnal except the original one. It had not been written in 1737. Charles Wesley is credited with writing some 6,500 hymns. Some sources say the total is closer to 7,500. Accounts I read say that 5,500 of them were not very good, but 1,000 hymns is quite a legacy to leave to your church. That’s 999 more than Martin Luther left! These hymns present the message we have sought to proclaim to the world, and on the American frontier it was the music, the hymns of Charles Wesley, that carried the “singing Methodists” to every village and town.

Charles Wesley was a prolific writer, but his words came from his passion for Christ. He had a profound sense of joy over the reality of the incarnation, and that joy overflowed in his ministry and his verse. (Sounds like something we can

learn from!) The Wesley brothers were constantly overwhelmed by God's grace and passionate in their mission in the world. That came out in Charles Wesley's music. His music embraced three central themes which we still affirm today.

A Love for the Body, the Community of Faith

The hallmark of Methodism as a movement was this deep, abiding sense of community. Early Methodism grew not in sanctuaries and cathedrals, but in kitchens and sitting rooms, as societies, bands, and class meetings gathered believers in a fellowship connected by love. That theme is important for United Methodists today. We may disagree and argue, but in the end we are bound together, realizing that the mission and task of the church is greater than our differences and divisions. Of course, Wesley would sing about it. Hymn #562 is a prayer for peace within the body, unity over strife and love within our common life.

*Jesus Lord, we look to thee,
Let us in thy name agree;
Show thyself the Prince of Peace
bid our strife forever cease.*

*By thy reconciling love
every stumbling block remove,
Each to each unite, endear;
Come and spread thy banner here.*

*Free from anger and from pride
let us thus in God abide;
All the depths of love express,
all the heights of holiness.*

(UM Hymnal #562, *Jesus, Lord, We Look to Thee*)

A Passion for the World

Ours is not just religion, not just a deeply felt spirituality or a sound theology. It is always coupled with a love for others and a passion for the needs of the world - that burning desire to touch others with the love of Christ. Hymn #650 expresses the desire to use every moment, every means available to share the Gospel and to serve those who have not yet come to know of God's grace:

*I would the precious time redeem
And longer live for this alone,
To spend and to be spent for them
Who have not yet my Saviour known.
Fully on these, my mission prove,
And only breathe to breathe thy love.*

(UM Hymnal #650, *Give Me the Faith Which Can Remove*)

This desire to link the personal experience of God's grace with passionate service in the world is central to the Methodist tradition and mission. On a more somber note, here's a hymn text which I have never heard sung. You will find the poem on Page 449 of *The United Methodist Hymnal*. It sounds like it was written for our world today — a world of injustice including arrogant politicians, rising animosities with the killing of Christians in other parts of the world, on-going strife in the Sudan, the ancient, seemingly endless violence between Israel and Palestine, the war in Iraq, and the daily sacrifice of soldiers and civilians:

*Our earth we now lament to see
With floods of wickedness overflowed,
With violence, wrong and cruelty
One wide extended field of blood,
Where men like fiends each other tear
In all the hellish rage of war.*

*O might the universal friend
This havoc of his creatures see!
Bid our unnatural discord end
Declare us reconciled in thee
Write kindness on our inward parts
And chase the murderer from our hearts.*

(UM Hymnal #449, *Our Earth We Now Lament to See*)

Now that's passion -- passion for the world, for peace, and for reconciliation.

The Wonder of God's Grace.

Charles Wesley was simply amazed by the love of God. Hymn #342 is known as his "conversion hymn." It was written after his own conversion and sung with brother John after John's Aldersgate experience, May 24, 1738. It expresses the wonder of the soul beginning the journey of faith in Christ:

*Where shall my wondering soul begin?
How shall I all to heaven aspire?
A slave, redeemed from death and sin
A brand plucked from eternal fire.
How shall I equal triumphs raise,
And sing my great deliverer's praise?*

(UM Hymnal #342, *Where Shall My Wondering Soul Begin*)

Charles never lost his sense of wonder at God's amazing grace. One of his greatest hymns, UM Hymnal #363, has always been sung on both sides of the Atlantic to a stirring tune:

*And can it be that I should gain an interest in the savior's blood?
Died he for me, who caused his pain, for me, who him to death pursued?
Amazing love, how can it be that thou my God shouldst die for me?*

*He left his fathers throne above (so free, so infinite he grace)
Emptied himself of all by love and bled for Adam's helpless race.
Tis mercy all, immense and free, for O my God, it found out me.*

*No condemnation now I dread; Jesus and all in him is mine.
Alive in him, my living head, and clothed in righteousness divine,
Bold, I approach the eternal throne, and claim a crown through Christ my
own.*

(UM Hymnal #363, *And Can It Be that I Should Gain*)

This song of praise, this awe at God's grace is central to Wesley's hymns and central to our worship - a sense of wonder and amazement at God's love, God's goodness, God's salvation, a sense of awe that is contagious if we have it.

On the Move

Recently, I read an article from several years ago entitled, "*Charles Wesley's Body on the Move.*" The article says, "More than two centuries after his death, the great Epworth-born hymn writer, Charles Wesley, may be on the move again." It seems his actual burial place was then beneath the playground of a school which was planning to expand. There is a statue of Wesley on the grounds and most thought he was buried there, but he was not. When the playground was dug up, Wesley's bones were moved to holier ground. So Charles Wesley's body was on the move. I like that. I hope it is true of us, too. I hope his body, the United Methodist Church, is on the move. We carry with us the bones of Wesley, the songs of God's grace, the music of the spirit, the anthem of praise, and the good news for the world.

I hope THIS body (East Cobb UMC) is on the move, too. I hope our fellowship, our worship, our celebration, and our life together will be marked by:

- A love for the community of faith.
- A passion for the lost and the pain of the world.
- And praise at the wonder of God's grace.

Charles Wesley's epitaph might well have come from the last line of one of his hymns...

*Happy, if with my latest breath
I may but gasp Christ's name;
Preach him to all and cry in death,
"Behold, behold the Lamb!"*

(UM Hymnal #193, *Jesus! the Name High over All*)

The title of my sermon today comes from the refrain of a relatively modern hymn of the faith which is Hymn #77 in our hymnal. It is not a Charles Wesley hymn, but I think it captures the essence of why he wrote so many hymns of joy.

*Then sings my soul, my Savior God to thee;
How great thou art, how great thou art!*

*Then sings my soul, my Savior God to thee;
How great thou art, how great thou art!*

(UM Hymnal #77, *How Great Thou Art*)

Does your soul “sing” out of joy for the grace, mercy, love, and peace that is ours through Christ? Does your soul burn with a passion for the pain of the world? Is your soul yearning to do those things that build the Body and create Christian community? Is your soul singing because of the presence of the Spirit of God? If not, it’s time to sing a new song!

Prayer

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SCRIPTURES THAT TEACH US TO SING!

Rejoice in the LORD, O ye righteous: for praise is comely for the upright. Praise the LORD with harp: sing unto him with the psaltery and an instrument of ten strings. Sing unto him a new song; play skillfully with a loud noise. For the word of the LORD is right; and all his works are done in truth. - Psalm 33:1-14.

My heart is fixed, O God, my heart is fixed: I will sing and give praise. Awake up, my glory; awake, psaltery and harp: I myself will awake early. I will praise thee, O Lord, among the people: I will sing unto thee among the nations. - Psalm 57:7-9.

Make a joyful noise unto God, all ye lands: Sing forth the honor of his name: make his praise glorious. - Psalm 66:1-2.

Sing aloud unto God our strength: make a joyful noise unto the God of Jacob. Take a psalm, and bring hither the timbrel, the pleasant harp with the psaltery. Blow up the trumpet in the new moon, in the time appointed, on our solemn feast day. -Psalm 81:1-3.

Thou shalt increase my greatness, and comfort me on every side. I will also praise thee with the psaltery, even thy truth, O my God: unto thee will I sing with the harp, O thou Holy One of Israel. My lips shall greatly rejoice when I sing unto thee; and my soul, which thou hast redeemed. - Psalm 71:21-23.

It is a good thing to give thanks unto the LORD, and to sing praises unto thy name, O most High: To shew forth thy lovingkindness in the morning, and thy faithfulness every night, Upon an instrument of ten strings, and upon the psaltery; upon the harp with a solemn sound. - Psalm 92:1-3.

O come, let us sing unto the LORD: let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation. Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving, and make a joyful noise unto him with psalms. - Psalm 95:1-2.

Make a joyful noise unto the LORD, all the earth: make a loud noise, and rejoice, and sing praise. Sing unto the LORD with the harp; with the harp, and the voice of a psalm. With trumpets and sound of cornet make a joyful noise before the LORD, the King. - Psalm 98:4-6.

Make a joyful noise unto the LORD, all ye lands. Serve the LORD with gladness: come before his presence with singing. - Psalm 100:1-2.

I will sing a new song unto thee, O God: upon a psaltery and an instrument of ten strings will I sing praises unto thee. - Psalm 144:9.

Let Israel rejoice in him that made him: let the children of Zion be joyful in their King. Let them praise his name in the dance: let them sing praises unto him with the timbrel and harp. For the LORD taketh pleasure in his people: he will beautify the meek with salvation. - Psalm 149:2-4.

Praise him for his mighty acts: praise him according to his excellent greatness. Praise him with the sound of the trumpet: praise him with the psaltery and harp. Praise him with the timbrel and dance: praise him with stringed instruments and organs. Praise him upon the loud cymbals: praise him upon the high sounding cymbals. Let every thing that hath breath praise the LORD. Praise ye the LORD. - Psalm 150:2-6.

Who, having received such a charge, thrust them into the inner prison, and made their feet fast in the stocks. And at midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God: and the prisoners heard them. And suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken: and immediately all the doors were opened, and every one's bands were loosed. - Acts 16:24-26.

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him. - Colossians 3:16-17.

Is any among you afflicted? let him pray. Is any merry? let him sing psalms. - James 5:13.

Verily I say unto you, I will drink no more of the fruit of the vine, until that day that I drink it new in the kingdom of God. And when they had sung an hymn, they went out into the Mount of Olives. - Mark 14:25-26.

Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord; Giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ; Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God. - Ephesians 5:19-21.