

Music Hath Charms

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 3rd Sunday after Pentecost, June 9, 1991. Scripture Lessons: 1 Samuel 16:14-23; Psalm 57; 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1; Mark 3:20-35.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

This well known story tells how David's talents as a musician brought King Saul out of a deep depression. Saul had everything a human being could want. He was strong, handsome, powerful, popular, and wealthy. But in the course of time he gradually lost his sense of God's presence. King Saul began to feel God-forsaken. "The Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord troubled him."

These words present a number of problems for the modern reader. One problem is the very notion of good and evil spirits. Most people living in America today don't attribute depression to evil spirits. We look for psychological reasons to explain a person's behavior. Apparently, King Saul was suffering from what people today might call depression caused by some kind of emotional disorder.

The most serious problem presented by this passage, however, is the idea that God was the One who sent the evil spirit. How can a good God send an evil spirit? And I must frankly tell you that I don't know how to interpret this difficult passage without, on the one hand, rationalizing it away or, on the other hand, making God the author of evil. I'm not willing to do either but I'm not sure that I can avoid one or the other.

Apparently, the Spirit of God withdrew from Saul because of his disobedience and he was overcome by a spirit of depression and alienation. This experience of God forsakenness has been experienced by many Christians

throughout the centuries. William Cowper wrote about it in one of his hymns,

Return, O holy Dove, return,
Sweet messenger of rest!
I hate the sins that made Thee mourn
And drove Thee from my breast.

The Westminster Confession of Faith mentions this experience in Chapter XX where we read, "True believers may have the assurance of their salvation divers ways shaken, diminished, and intermitted... by God's withdrawing the light of his countenance and suffering even such as fear him to walk in darkness and to have no light: yet are they never utterly destitute of that seed of God, and life of faith, that love of Christ and the brethren, that sincerity of heart and conscience of duty, out of which, by the operation of the Spirit, this assurance may in due time be revived, and by the which, in the meantime, they are supported from utter despair."

That thought may trouble you if you've never had the experience. But if you've had the experience, as I have, those words mean a lot because it means that we can't always attribute this sense of God forsakenness to our own sin.

Sometimes devout Christians feel rejected by God and feel that nothing they do will make any difference. There are few more distressing conditions calling for treatment by ministers. When I offer the gospel assurance of forgiveness for every sin, when I remind them that 'the blood of Jesus... cleanses us from all sin' they have a ready answer: there's one sin which is an exception and they've committed it.

Perhaps this is how King Saul felt. "I've sinned against God. The Lord has rejected me as King. God has abandoned me. I've been forsaken by the Lord."

But the good news of this passage is that God sent the shepherd boy, David, to restore the king's spirit and cast out the evil Spirit. I believe that if trouble and evil of any kind comes into our lives, whatever the source of that trouble and evil is, the God whom we've come to know through Jesus Christ will provide a way for us to get through that trouble and beyond that evil. And even when I feel that God has forsaken me, as Saul must have felt, I think of Christ who, himself, felt forsaken of God on the cross. God won't necessarily spare us trouble. God won't necessarily prevent us from feeling God forsaken but God will give us the resources that we need to see us through that trouble so that we're supported from utter despair.

That's what the Lord did for King Saul. If God removed his Spirit from Saul and sent an evil spirit, the Lord also sent David to be with him in his desolation and to restore his soul. The story of David playing his harp and casting out Saul's evil spirit points us to Jesus, who like David, has come to cast out our evil spirits and fill us with the Spirit of God.

Robert Browning once wrote a poem based on this passage of Scripture. Browning imagined that David sang to Saul of Christ. David sang of the coming of Jesus to save Saul and to open for him the gates of new life. Browning imagined that the Gospel message of the coming of Jesus, the Christ, lifted Saul from his depression, drove away the evil spirit, and restored his hope. In the words of Robert Browning we hear David sing,

"O Saul, it shall be
 A Face like my face that receives thee; a Man
 like to me,
 Thou shalt love and be loved by, for ever; a
 Hand like this hand
 Shall throw open the gates of new life to thee!
 See the Christ stand!"

Browning was right. Jesus is music to the sinner's ears.

Jesus! the name that charms our fears,
That bids our sorrows cease,
'Tis music in the sinner's ears,
'Tis life and health and peace."

In Jesus we see the One to whom David pointed. In Jesus we see God in the flesh coming down to earth bearing our pains and griefs. Christ has come to drive out the evil spirit and to make the afflicted whole. Jesus has come to bind Satan, to release us from the grip of the principalities and powers of this world that bind us. Jesus has come to release us from the grip of depression, despair and the spirit of evil.

Regardless of the evil in the world and in our own hearts, in Christ we see that God receives and loves us. The pierced hands of the Risen Christ throw open the gates of new life to you and to me and to all who trust him.

Let us pray: Lord our God, in Christ we see that you have a human face; in Christ you have experienced all that we can ever experience including God-forsakenness. We see your strength and power above all in the weakness and powerlessness that Jesus experienced on the cross. Give us your Spirit to trust in Christ. May the Gospel of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus be music to our souls. Throw upon the gates of new life to each one of us. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

*Melba
June 29
Pot luck
supper*

Prayers of the People

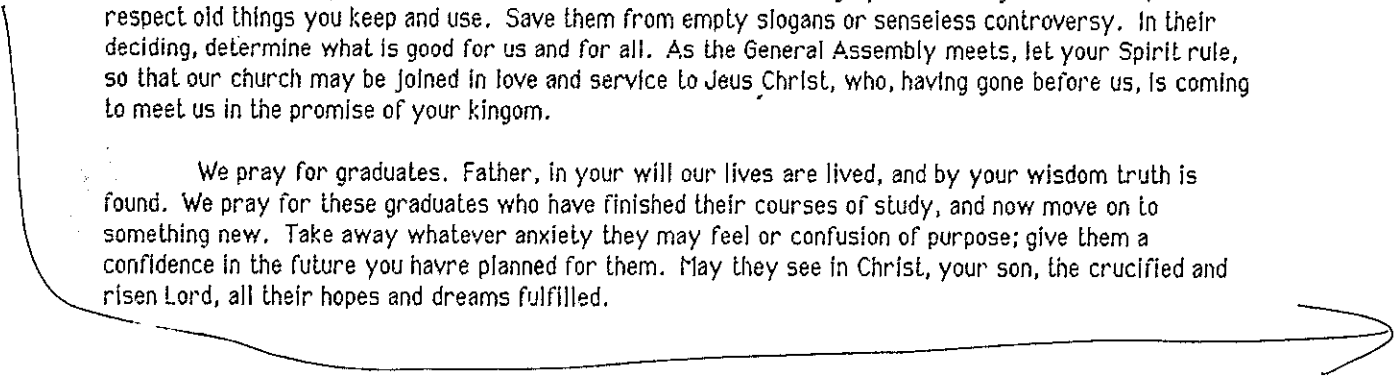
Be merciful to us, O God, be merciful to us, for in you we take refuge; in the shadow of your wings we will take refuge. Be exalted, O God, above the heavens. Let your glory be over all the earth. For your steadfast love is as high as the heavens.

*Budweiser's
Hugh McAllister
grandmother*

Lord, we pray for the world you made. Deal with injustice, feed and satisfy the longing peoples so that in freedom your children may enjoy the world you have made.

We pray for your church. We pray especially for the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) meeting in Baltimore. Help them to welcome new things you are doing in the world, and to respect old things you keep and use. Save them from empty slogans or senseless controversy. In their deciding, determine what is good for us and for all. As the General Assembly meets, let your Spirit rule, so that our church may be joined in love and service to Jesus Christ, who, having gone before us, is coming to meet us in the promise of your kingdom.

We pray for graduates. Father, in your will our lives are lived, and by your wisdom truth is found. We pray for these graduates who have finished their courses of study, and now move on to something new. Take away whatever anxiety they may feel or confusion of purpose; give them a confidence in the future you have planned for them. May they see in Christ, your son, the crucified and risen Lord, all their hopes and dreams fulfilled.



Merciful God, you bear the hurt of the world. Look with compassion on those who are sick especially on... Ed Neidigh, Clara Wiley, Father John Obenchain; cheer them by your word, and bring health as a sign that, in your promise kingdom, there will be no more pain or crying;

And now as Christ has taught us, hear us as we humbly pray...