

Songs to Sooth the Savage Soul

^{NRS} **1 Samuel 16:14** Now the spirit of the LORD departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the LORD tormented him. ¹⁵ And Saul's servants said to him, "See now, an evil spirit from God is tormenting you. ¹⁶ Let our lord now command the servants who attend you to look for someone who is skillful in playing the lyre; and when the evil spirit from God is upon you, he will play it, and you will feel better." ¹⁷ So Saul said to his servants, "Provide for me someone who can play well, and bring him to me." ¹⁸ One of the young men answered, "I have seen a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite who is skillful in playing, a man of valor, a warrior, prudent in speech, and a man of good presence; and the LORD is with him." ¹⁹ So Saul sent messengers to Jesse, and said, "Send me your son David who is with the sheep." ²⁰ Jesse took a donkey loaded with bread, a skin of wine, and a kid, and sent them by his son David to Saul. ²¹ And David came to Saul, and entered his service. Saul loved him greatly, and he became his armor-bearer. ²² Saul sent to Jesse, saying, "Let David remain in my service, for he has found favor in my sight." ²³ And whenever the evil spirit from God came upon Saul, David took the lyre and played it with his hand, and Saul would be relieved and feel better, and the evil spirit would depart from him.

“None of us would have made it without Elvis.” This is what the great Buddy Holly said about the healing, almost salvific, properties of Elvis’ music in his life. Now Buddy was a little before my time, but every generation seems to rediscover the healing properties of music.

In high school I dated a girl named Sarah. Now, Sarah was obsessed with Billy Joel- owned every album, knew every song, and even took up the saxophone because she loved Mark Rivera, who played saxophone in Billy Joel’s band. Naturally, since Sarah loved Billy Joel- I learned to as well. You know how that works. And I remember one interview we saw him give about going to Russia in 1987, the first rock and roll band to play in Russia since the Berlin wall. When pressed about how much money he was losing on the venture, and it’s estimated that Joel personally lost at least a million, he said it didn’t matter because of the goodwill and healing he brought. He said: “I think music in itself is healing. It's an explosive expression of humanity. It's something we are all touched by. No matter what culture we're from, everyone loves music.” And I’ll tell you,

if you've ever heard the version of the White Album Classic, Back in the U.S.S.R. he played in Moscow with these wild Russian kids just going crazy- you'd know he was on to something. So Buddy Holly. Billy Joel. In music itself- there's just something about it that is healing.

Many of you received a letter from me this week announcing the hiring of Ron Fabbro as our new accompanist. And Ron, we really are thrilled you are here! In the process this fall of working with the search committee and thinking more and more about how critical Kris and Martha and everyone involved in our music ministry are to the way we worship God- I started to wonder about the role of music in Scripture. And of course when I started poking around- I was amazed not only at the sheer number of references to music in Scripture, but also the variety of roles music played in the lives of the people of God. This morning we're going to look at one of the governing metaphors for music, which is music as an agent of healing, and over the next several weeks we'll look at four other ways music shows up in the Bible.

Oh, it's a sad story, the one we have before us. It's a tough one right from the start. There's poor King Saul, withdrawn in the corner. Everyone around him is afraid of him. No one knows quite what to do. It's a frightening thing when anyone suffers such a dark depression or mental illness- it's terrifying indeed when it's your king, your leader, the guy with his finger on the button. Now we're really not completely sure what was wrong with Saul- the text says he's being tormented by an evil Spirit. Some believe Saul suffered from epilepsy- that periodically a kind of massive electrical storm would surge

through his brain sending his body into uncontrollable spasms. Man alive if this isn't scary.

When I was 10 my brother and I rode up to ol' Bell High School one cool summer morning to play tennis. It was a weekday morning, we were out of school- I was elated my big brother was even paying attention to me, much less willing to play tennis with me. And I remember we played for almost an hour, when he started to act funny. At one point, rather than hit one of the balls lying on the court back to me, he walked over and started kind of playing with it with his racket. Now, my brother will do things that are kind of goofy- just to be funny. I thought he was just being silly. When he looked up though, his eyes were all glassy- he had a kind of far away look in them. Immediately, I knew something wasn't right. I stopped over the net, and asked him if he was OK. I remember my voice sounded so small. He didn't look up or talk to me. Now, ever since he had a car accident when he was sixteen, my brother was epileptic- and at that point his seizures were not under control. I had seen them before, but always when my mom was around- never alone. So, feeling really scared and not knowing what to do I just kind of put my arm around him and took him over to some metal bleachers by the side of the court- you know the portable ones with the levels of steps. We sat down on the front bench, I kept trying to get him to tell me what was wrong. And then, and my mind at this point has almost completely blanked out the details, I saw his eyes roll back and he started to seize- this time a full grand mal, his whole body shaking and jerking. Now, of course the best thing would have been just to put him on the ground with something soft under his head. The poor guy- he got kind of caught in between those bleachers and just banged into everything. After a couple of days when he was feeling better, he was asking

my mom about how he got so many bruises. My mom just changed the topic- I think it was years before she told him I put him on the bleachers to have a seizure.

Well, fortunately, there were two young guys playing way down at the other end. When it looked like Rob was calming down, I ran down there and yelled for help. And they, kind saints that they were, loaded up our bikes and took us home. And you know- I could be wrong, but I think that was the last time my brother and I ever played tennis together.

So many folks think it was a seizure- that Saul was epileptic. And it certainly could be. Others, though, believe Saul was troubled by a massive, dark depression. Still others have argued that Saul was bi-polar, given that he was at times so successful and full of energy on the battlefield, and then there were these times in court when barely functioned.

Well, whatever the actual disease, we at least have a really good idea why Saul was suffering so much on that particular day. Two critical, earth shattering things happen to Saul just before this story. In the chapter preceding this, the prophet Samuel, that little boy we heard about last week, had the terribly painful job of telling Saul that because of his unfaithfulness, God was removing him as king. In a dramatic scene after Samuel delivers the grim news, Saul grabs hold of the prophet's robe and it tears. Filled with anger, Samuel gets right up close to Saul's face and says, "The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today and has given it to one of your neighbors-- to one better than you." I'm not sure he needed to add that last part- but add it he did.

And then in Chapter 16, immediately before our text for this morning, Samuel had another difficult duty. Going from king breaker to king maker, Samuel followed God's

call that lead him to seek out a man named Jesse who lived in and around the hill country of Bethlehem. Samuel brought with him a horn filled with oil that he might pour it over God's newly anointed king, known as *Messiach* in Hebrew- or Messiah to us. And surprising even this old prophet, the Lord looked over Jesse's older sons and led him to pick a boy Jesse didn't even bother bringing because he was nothing but a scrawny little shepherd. I mean it might have been one thing to be replaced by an equal, by an accomplished man- it was a complete insult to be replaced by a little runt like David.

So, whatever the actual disease- Saul was clearly going through a terribly difficult time in his life, a time the text thickly describes as being troubled by a dark or evil spirit.

Well, Saul hasn't been the only person to be troubled in such a way. I suspect most of us sitting here this morning have known a crushing defeat or two or three and drifted into a kind of hopelessness and despair. Recently, I watched the documentary *Raising Cain: Boys in Focus* on PBS. It's a documentary hosted by a child psychologist, Michael Thompson, who leads us into the difficult world of boy culture. It was really fantastic. Honestly, I didn't mean to watch it. I sat down and then two hours later I was still sitting there- wishing it would continue. Thompson has the most amazing ability to get close to guys growing up and learning what was hard for them- and what was helpful.

One boy Thompson interviewed has stuck in my mind, a boy named Mike. More than anything else I would say Mike was troubled by a dark spirit. Thompson caught up with Mike as he was on the cusp between junior high and high school and he had turned something of a corner, but it hadn't always been like that. Growing up, Mike was not athletic in slightest, was overweight, and he suffered painful, relentless teasing at school.

Though bright, his school work suffered because of all of this, and then worst of all, Mike found one of the most effective ways to deal with this bullying was to become a bully himself. Mike started picking on little kids and found one in particular. In the video he takes Thompson out behind his school on a gloomy, overcast day, one like we know so well this time of year, and he pointed his arm to a spot and said, “That’s where it happened.”

Mike then described how one day he was so angry and frustrated that he took one of the little kids he bullied out to that spot and started calling him names and hitting him. It was like something had taken him over- something like a dark spirit welling up within him.

Now at the time of the video all of that was memory. Mike said how awful he felt about it. He said he had apologized to the boy and since then they actually became friends. And like I said, Mike had made improvements in other areas as well- he was getting better grades in school and he was making friends. Now, you’d think parents would be thrilled by all of this, but Thompson found out that the catalyst for all of this change was Mike’s involvement in a heavy metal band and his growing fascination with metal and everything around it.

One of my favorite moments in the interview was the time Thompson spent with the parents. Like any good parents they were on the fence. They obviously wanted their son to do well, but they admitted they were afraid of this music and much of what seemed to go with it. His mom was concerned about the language and the violence in it. His dad, though, was my favorite. He optimistically said, “I just keep telling him, you know you don’t have to choose. You can do the band and you can learn to play golf.”

They were thankful for the change, but they sure didn't expect healing to come from heavy metal, and they were definitely nervous about it. Well, Mike's first big concert was coming up- Thompson suggested waiting until the concert to make any judgments. Indeed, healing can come in the strangest of ways.

And this is exactly how it came for Saul. In the text this morning healing came in the strangest way of all- it came from the music of a boy who really should be Saul's mortal enemy. Apparently, whenever David would lay hold of that lyre, that harp, of his- the music was so sweet it would put Saul at ease. This connection between music and healing- it's not merely Biblical but cuts across other ancient Middle Eastern cultures, too. For the ancient Greeks, Apollo was not only the god of music, but the god of healing as well. The caduceus, which you'll either see as a pole with two snakes, or an stake with one snake, is most originally the sign of Asclepius, a famous Greek healer- himself purportedly the son of Apollo. And this connection still holds up today. Professor John Jenkins at the University of London studies what he calls the "Mozart Effect". He has found short bursts of one of Mozart's sonatas has been found to decrease epileptic attacks. Further, the American Music Therapy Association's web page cites similar good news about the effect of music on depression as well.

You know, the surprise in this story isn't that David's *music* heals Saul and makes the old king feel better. It's that it is *David's* music that heals Saul and makes the old king feel well again. And undoubtedly, if Saul were to imagine what it would take to make him well again- regaining the kingdom would probably top the list. But sometimes healing comes to us in the strangest of forms and from people we least expect- if we but

allow it to happen. I wonder about us- I wonder what people there are in our lives who are offering us words we need to hear, singing songs that need to be sung, only because we don't expect it or don't want to hear it- we're missing out.

Well, I found myself on the edge of my seat as the night of Mike's concert came up. Mike and his bandmates pretended that everything was OK, but they were pacing around enough I thought they might wear a groove in the floor. And they had a reason to be nervous, at the teen club they were playing at, not as many of their friends showed up so the crowd was mainly older kids from high school. A lot was riding on this. But then they started to play- and I have to say, as a drummer myself, I was blown away by this kid. I'm not a fan of heavy metal at all, but it was a blast to watch him and his friends play. This overweight, shy kid who could barely look at the camera when he was talking and almost never smiled- was absolutely in his element. The highschool kids were clearly impressed. It was a triumph. And when Thompson interviewed Mike after the show, with this huge grin on his face this is what he said, "I really had fun tonight. And I think if those kids who made fun of me when I was younger could have seen me tonight- I don't think they would make fun of me anymore."

Spiritual healing through heavy metal. Why not? And Thompson summed up what it was harder for his parents and those close to him to see- it wasn't so much the content of the music that attracted Mike as much as the fact that he was good at it and he made friends doing it. Moreover, Thompson was thrilled that even his golf happy dad was trying to get on board and was learning more about the musicians Mike was interested in and even planning on hitting Ozfest with his son the next time it rolled into

town. Spiritual healing through heavy metal? Why not- it's as likely as a deposed king being made well by his child rival.

I've said it before but I'll say it again. Karl Barth says God can speak through Chinese communism or a dead dog if God wants to. Truth is, God is using any means necessary to send us healing grace. Good church people like ourselves are always looking for God to speak to us through nice, churchy ways. And I suppose sometimes God does- but more often than not, God seems to work through less likely means of grace like shepherd boys and loud music. So, let me leave you with surprisingly theological words from Metallica- a band I had written off until I worked at McDonald's one summer and closed the shop every night to Master of Puppets, the manager's favorite album ever. These are words from God Who Failed- a song about when religion gets in the way of faith. My sense here is that James Hetfield who wrote this song puts flesh so to speak on the theological concept of Christ one of Barth's students named Jurgen Moltmann calls The Crucified God, a concept reminding us we follow a God who wasn't successful in any normal, worldly sense of the term:

Pride you took
 Pride you feel
 Pride that you felt when you'd kneel

Not the word
 Not the love
 Not what you thought from above

I see faith in your eyes
 I hear faith in your cries
 The healing hand held back by the deepened nail
 Follow the God that failed

Find your peace

Find your say
Find the smooth road in your way

Trust you gave
A child to save
Left you cold and him in grave

I see faith in your eyes
I hear faith in your cries
The healing hand held back by the deepened nail
Follow the God that failed

Friends, do yourself a favor this week. Listen to a different radio station- one that drives you nuts for a day. If you've got a kid- ask them if you can borrow one of their CD's- one you're not sure you'll like. If you a kid- ask your mom and dad for some Neil Diamond, Barry Manilow, or something along those lines. Elvis; a young Shepherd boy; or heavy metal- God's healing can come in the strangest of ways. Thanks be to God.

Amen.