

## **It's All in the Timing**

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Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

11th Sunday after Pentecost - August 21, 2022

Texts: 1 Samuel 15:14-23, Luke 13:10-17

### **1 Samuel 15:14-23**

Now the spirit of God departed from Saul, the king of Israel, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him. And Saul's servants said to him, "See now, an evil spirit from God is tormenting you. 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." So Saul said to his servants, "Provide for me someone who can play well, and bring him to me." 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." So Saul sent messengers to Jesse, and said, "Send me your son David who is with the sheep." Jesse took a donkey loaded with bread, a skin of wine, and a kid, and sent them by his son David to Saul. And David came to Saul, and entered his service. Saul loved him greatly, and he became his armor-bearer. Saul sent to Jesse, saying, "Let David remain in my service, for he has found favor in my sight." 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.

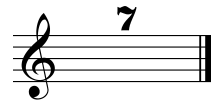
### **GOSPEL READING**

Luke 13:10-17

Now Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues on the sabbath. And just then there appeared a woman with a spirit that had crippled her for eighteen years. She was bent over and was quite unable to stand up straight. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." When he laid his hands on her, immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. But the leader of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had cured on the sabbath, kept saying to the crowd, "There are six days on which work ought to be done; come on those days and be cured, and not on the sabbath day." But the Lord answered him and said, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger, and lead it away to give it water? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen long years, be set free from this bondage on the sabbath day?" When he said this, all his opponents were put to shame; and the entire crowd was rejoicing at all the wonderful things that he was doing.

Your word, our light; your grace, our hope; your love, our life. TBTG

We are exceptionally blessed today by the music of Lori, Kimberlee, Anne, and Bri. A string quartet always seems to me to be one of the most exquisite blendings of sound this side of heaven. More intimate than an orchestra, more complex and conversational than a soloist. TY!

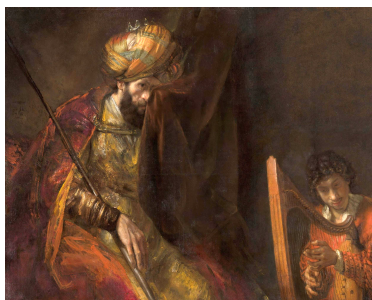


What I have learned as a humble amateur is that, when playing with others, timing is everything. Getting the notes right is one thing; playing or singing them at the right time is another. Suddenly seeing seven measures of *no notes* is a whole new challenge. I just keep counting and hoping I'll come in again at the right time.

What a lesson: To know when to sing, when to play, how long to hold, but also when to be silent, when to rest. Silence makes the music, right? And music heals us. Music heals.

Today we have two Bible stories about healing where timing plays a crucial role. The first, from the Old Testament: Saul, the first king of Israel, chosen by God, has screwed up. Never mind how for today; suffice it to say that he's going to be relieved of his crown. Dethroned. Sensing this, maybe, he's troubled. The Bible says "an evil spirit from God" consumes him. Who knows, maybe it's his conscience? At any rate, his counselors advise music to soothe the savage breast. Enter David and his harp (or lyre, as it's called here).

When we were little, we learned a song about David. The chorus went "Little David, play on your harp, hallelu, hallelu, little David, play on your harp, hallelu." And there were various verses that we sang with gusto: "David was a shepherd boy, he killed Goliath and shouted for joy." Simplistic, but kids could understand. When my sisters and I got older, we made up our own verses; biblical, yes, but with a slightly satirical bent: "Adam blamed Eve for the fruit he did take. Now you tell me, just who was the snake? Little David, play on your harp...." We knew our Bibles, yes. But we weren't innocents anymore. The time was different.



But back to David and King Saul. David's first visits to the king go swimmingly. There's this beautiful painting by Rembrandt. Saul in the foreground is caught wiping a tear from his eye. His bad mood passes off. His spirit is healed. Is it a miracle? The miraculous healing power of music. Saul heaps honors on David and hires him for a regular gig. What more could a musician want? But David has other skills. He did slay Goliath, after all. He goes out and

kills a whole lot of enemies in battle. Maidens swoon and sing about him and throw flowers, and probably themselves, on him. It's a different time. Now is *not* the time to play, David. The evil spirit of



Saul's jealousy rears its head. Twice when David is plunking away as usual, Saul falls into an murderous rage and tries to pin his musician to the wall with his spear. David barely escapes with his life. A steady gig is nice but only if the timing is right.



Well, as we know, eventually David did replace Saul as king, and had many adventures in that job: some good, some bad, some truly ugly. But we are told that he kept writing and playing music. Some of his songs we still have in the form of psalms, that 3000-year-old hymnbook. Look at the superscriptions on them: David had the audacity to give his music director directions (something I would never dream of doing). Maybe one reason David's story has a happier ending than Saul's is because music stayed a part of his life forever. God and music got him through the tough parts. Healed him when he needed healing most. I even found research claiming that listening to music that makes you feel joyful reduces the risk of heart attack or stroke.<sup>1</sup>

But as I said, we have two stories today. The other is how Jesus healed a woman who'd been bent over for 18 years. Totally unable to stand up straight. It doesn't have much to do with music, but it has everything to do with timing. Jesus got into trouble over timing. He healed her on the seventh day, the Sabbath day, the day when no one was supposed to do any work. Unlike poor King Saul's condition, the spirit afflicting this poor woman is not "from God," but is the work of Satan, who has bound her as effectively as if she's been tied in knots with ropes. Imagine 18 years where all you can see is the dirt under your feet, and suddenly you're looking people in the eye. They're standing there cheering and applauding for you. All except the leader of the synagogue, who has appointed himself the boss of timing. What Jesus has done is wicked and wrong, he says. Not the healing *per se*, but the timing. Jesus calls him on his error. What is Sabbath really for if not liberation from what binds you, ties you down? There's a true story of a Rochester woman who was literally bent double for years, due to an accident at work, and who was miraculously healed. Ask Sue Chipman about it. It's quite an amazing story. But Jesus, with his impeccable timing, is using this woman's 18-year-long disability to talk about more than physical healing. He says, there is no better time than the Sabbath to be released from whatever imprisons you.



Who isn't bound, tied up, held captive by something? It might be a sense of guilt for something that's not your fault; it might be an addiction that has gripped you so securely that you think you'll never escape. To you, Jesus says, "You are set free."

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.mentalhelp.net/blogs/music-hath-charms-to-soothe-the-savage-breast/>

I don't have to imagine what it feels like to be this woman. I know. I was in a seminary chapel service when I *really heard* the life-saving news in this story for the first time. A woman was preaching. I can't remember her words, but she showed me my own life as I had never let myself see it before. I saw that I had spent eighteen years twisting myself into knots like a pretzel, placating and dodging the anger of the man who was my husband. I saw how I had bound myself by vows that his violence had long ago rendered null and void. My friend Kris was sitting next to me. She saw my tears and asked why. I told her. I said, "I am that woman." She said, "Why don't you leave?" A perfectly reasonable question with a perfectly reasonable answer: "I have no safe place to go." She didn't hesitate. She said, "Come and stay with me and my husband." Her words were like Jesus saying, "You are set free."

The timing was perfect. It wasn't until later that I realized my husband had been just as much a prisoner of the abusive cycle as I, just as bound. And the synagogue leader who objected to Jesus' Sabbath healing? He was bound and hurting, too. Bent on finding solid ground in the law, he couldn't look up and see the real need of the people around him. We all have a little of him in us, too. We hear people's cry for healing, justice, wholeness or freedom, but respond, "Yes, but it's too much, too soon! The timing isn't right! Come back later!" That's not Jesus' answer.

Whatever the jail you've been put in, or put yourself in, or put others in, when Jesus shows up, and says, "You are set free," you'd better believe it. It's time. Amen

## **Prayers**

Liberating, healing God, we thank you for your perfect timing. When we grow anxious, remind us that you use us best when we follow your direction. Open us to opportunities to be the change we wish to see in the world. At the same time, we see so much that grieves us: droughts and floods, un-contained forest fires, and unrestrained viruses. Help us to jump in where we are needed.

We thank you for all the good gifts that enrich our lives: the sweetness of the harvest, the brilliance of mature flower gardens, the soothing sound of music. May all people have equal access to these good things.

Be with all who travel; encourage those who have made or are planning major life changes; bring us all into harmony. Bless your church worldwide with life and growth; remember us all in your kingdom and teach us to pray:

Beloved, Center and Source of our living, whose presence is heaven, your holy love fills Creation. May your delight be fulfilled and your Realm unfold among us, the visible world blossoming out of the unseen. We turn to you alone for our sustenance, the bread of life each day. Set us free from our failings, as we set free all who have failed us. Lead us beyond our desires and save us from the grip of evil. For the world is within you; all power is from you, and all glory is about you in eternity, which is the present moment. Amen