

June 24, 2018

TEXT: 2 Corinthians 6:1–13

TITLE: Spiritual Music

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Listen to this familiar Bach prelude. Don't think of it as a performance—and don't clap. Try to think of it as a type of spiritual music—a piece that conveys on some level a truth about God, about us, and what connects us to God. Focus on your own breathing and let the music be an accompaniment to each time you inhale and exhale. (Play Bach C major prelude)

Bach's C major prelude is a wonder. 35 measures long—a broken chord played twice per measure. It unfolds as a steady stream of harmony and sound, as rhythmic as our breathing. Too often we are literally unaware of the very things that keep us alive—like our ability to breathe. Inhale—exhale.

So instead of describing the spiritual life in words, what if we pointed to a musical definition. Does Bach's Prelude express the spiritual music of life? Yes, in some ways. It reminds us to slow down—to sense the steady beat of our heart and the regular metronome of our breathing. In the same way, it reminds us that faith is the foundation upon which we build our lives. It is the knowledge that we awaken each day into a world we did not make; that we are fearfully and wonderfully made, and that life is both a gift and a miracle. We live and breathe, think, dream, laugh, and love—a small part of a universe we believe is overseen by a loving Creator God.

Some see life as a product of chance—of evolutionary whimsy and blind luck. But Bach's notes didn't emerge by chance. There is an order and beauty in his Prelude that reflects the order and beauty of life itself. Sure, we can analyze Bach's chord progressions, just as we can study biology, chemistry, and physics. But in both cases, the whole is much more than the parts. Something deep and inexpressible tries to be expressed in Bach's spiritual music. It quiets us down and reminds us of the wonder inherent in life itself—and how life has a fundamental rhythm to it, like breathing in and breathing out; and that it's this same foundation we associate with God and God's love for us.

Having said all that, it is true that life—spiritual life—is more than just quieting down and meditation. Our days marked by times of both joy and sorrow, love and loss, peace and violence. Even as we lift our eyes to the hills and affirm our help comes from Lord, who made the heavens and the earth (Psalm 121), there are other times we cry out “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Psalm 22) Any honest language of faith has to speak of the times of struggle as well as the times of peace. So if we are looking for a spiritual music of faith, it must also express this reality of storms and sunshine—especially in today's turbulent world. So listen now to another Prelude, this one by Chopin.

(Prelude op. 28, no. 20 – C minor)

Chopin's Prelude in C minor—17 measures long. Instead of the chords being broken into arpeggios like Bach, the chords are solid – all their voices sounding at once. And instead of unfolding like a flowing stream or regular breathing, the music comes out in a forceful pattern that never varies—1,2,3 & 4—like a person making an argument and carefully choosing her words.

Does Chopin's Prelude capture the spiritual music of life? It too is beautiful. It too is steady like a heartbeat within us. And it contains a sense of agitation, of crying out in a lover's quarrel with the universe. But because it ends on a minor chord, there is a lingering sadness to this song—perhaps honestly reminding us that our human condition's physical story always ends with the grave.

Our days are less like Bach's piece and more like Chopin's Prelude. Our waking hours are seldom quiet and meditative. There are bills to be paid, Pittsburgh traffic to navigate, daily stresses that require blood pressure pills and prescription meds. There are challenges at home and at work; there are even greater challenges we read about in the news and social media. We try to stay informed. We try to hear both sides of the arguments: reading Ruth Ann Dailey and Tony Norman, Charles Krauthammer and Paul Krugman, tolerating conservative editorials so long as Rob Rogers' political cartoons are there as well. (Those last references are lost on you if you don't read the Post-Gazette.)

But as we all know: Things change. We can't keep up with everything anymore, nor do we have the energy most days to even try. So sometimes we feel like Chopin's Prelude, pounding out our chords of righteous anger. We loudly protest immigration policies that de-humanize people fleeing for their lives from violence at home by calling them opportunistic "illegals" trying to get ahead at our expense. We cry out against barbaric policies that separate children from parents, debasing every democratic ideal our country stands for. We weep over the shooting of Antwon Rose here in our city—the latest by-product of America's gun culture and of police officers using deadly force inappropriately and far too often because of racist profiling. And that is just this past week. How soon we forget things like the Parkland School shooting, the #MeToo sexual harassment scandals, the violence against Palestinians and the hurricane devastation in Puerto Rico.

Righteous anger is hard to sustain. We go to vigils; we write our elected officials; we march in the streets. Yet despite executive orders, thousands of children are still separated. Despite anti-racism training at Starbucks, too many African Americans and people of color live with oppression or end up victims of police violence. We don't know what else to do, so we shut down. We cancel our newspaper subscription; we close our social media accounts. The chords of the c-minor prelude ring out loudly at first, but end at last with a quiet cadence. Maybe the poet was right: "This is the way the world ends, not with a bang but a whimper."

The two preludes I've played don't fully reflect the spiritual music of life because they lack one thing—a melody. It's hard to sing Bach's arpeggios or Chopin's solid chords.

Music is more than just rhythm and harmony. It is more than just foundations (like breathing) and emotion (like powerful chords). It is also melody—something you can sing, something you can remember and hold onto, something that gives shape and direction to your life every day.

Spiritual melody is like asking ourselves “What do I believe?” What story do I trust—what melody is my song of life? There are lots of melodies to choose from, and not every song is worth singing. There’s the melody of self-reliance and egotism (“As long as I’m taken care of, everything’s alright”). There’s the melody of capitalism, believing having enough wealth will guarantee happiness. There’s the melody dependent on being healthy—everything’s good as long as I’m strong; the melody dependent on being in a relationship—everything’s good so long as I’m married or partnered or have kids or true friends around me; the melody of America First, of science will solve everything, of might makes right.

What do you really believe? What is the melody and song of your life? What is offered to you this day is the melody of faith contained in the song of Jesus Christ. This melody contains the foundations of life—things like breathing, the wonder of creation, of God coming to us and experiencing life with us. It contains the whole range of emotions—a joyful birth in Bethlehem and the anguish when Herod’s soldiers ripped children from mother’s arms; crowds fed with an amazing generosity arising from a few loaves and fishes; storms at sea quieted by a strong command; shared intimate meals in an Upper Room as well as the harshness of a public execution on a cross. Yet this melody doesn’t end on a minor chord. Its final note is not a grave but an empty tomb—the powerful symbol of resurrection, which is beyond our understanding yet part of a melody that resonates with our deepest being. Jesus’ song is not simplistic—not pie-in-the-sky, God will sort everything out for us. It is honest and complex, demanding our full attention and a lifetime of prayerful study. Yet it is a song that speaks of a promise that love wins and life, spiritual life, is eternal, and hope is real.

Today I close with another Chopin prelude—one that has a steady heartbeat within it, one that has moments of full chords and deep emotions, but one that also has a melody—a song that holds it all together, pointing to a spiritual music that is worth believing in. Believe in this story, this song, the living presence of Christ here, now and always. (Play Chopin Prelude op. 28, no. 15)

May all God’s people say, “Amen.”