

Hannover International Worship

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Sermon on Joshua 6

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Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

this summer we decided to do a sermon series in our congregation. This is always interesting and a lot of fun, for us preachers at least, and I hope for the congregation too. We have done a couple of those series before, and this time, we decided on "music stories of the bible". There should be lots of those to choose from, we figured. So, I went through my bible to find appropriate sermon texts, and I made a weird discovery.

I had searched for the word "sing" or "singing" first. Then, I had extended my search to musical instruments. Which instruments did they have in biblical times? No organ, no saxophone, that's for sure. Trumpets are mentioned a lot, but really, what they mean is not the brass instrument we are familiar with, but the shofar, the ram's horn.

So I tried to find those instances when the bible mentions trumpets. What would you expect to find with this search word? Festive music for important events? A king's wedding maybe? A special service in the Jerusalem temple?

Yes, there are those. But these are – by far! – outweighed by a totally different context. It's the context of wars and battles. The trumpet, or, more correctly, the shofar, the ram's horn, is a battle instrument, a signal horn, a call to arms. It tells the warriors: Go, fight!

At the same time, it tells the enemies: Run for your lives!

[Shofar-Horn]

The most famous example certainly being the trumpets of Jericho that actually did the trick all by themselves, no more fighting needed. Now that you have heard the sound of a shofar horn you can imagine that this might have worked.

Now how does that go together with our harmonious, peace-loving brass choirs, and just altogether with the harmonious idea we have of music?

In my further research I hit upon an interesting scientific study. Scientists tried to find out how music developed in the first place. How did human beings first come up with the idea to produce music, to sing, to play instruments?

Wouldn't communication simply by talking have been sufficient? The development of a spoken language is enough of a miracle, I would think. So why and how did people come up with the idea to sing and to play music?

The answer these scientists found surprised me. They said: War hymns are the origin of all singing.

War hymns? I don't know about you, but that's certainly not the answer I wanted to hear. Or that I would have expected. Music, isn't that just the most harmonious thing we can imagine? Isn't music simply the epitome of harmony, peace, and unity? How can the origin of this be in war hymns, of all things?

When we take a closer look though, the idea of these scientists may not be quite as absurd as it seems at first glance. Let's have a look at the "music" that is produced elsewhere, that is to say: in the animal kingdom.

The first "musicians" that come to mind certainly will be the birds. Don't we all love the dawn chorus in spring? Isn't it just the most amazingly beautiful thing to hear?

But now we need to ask the scientific question: Why do these birds sing in the first place?

Let's get one thing quite straight right from the beginning. These birds do not sing for our enjoyment.

These birds have two main reasons for their singing.

The first reason: They want to attract a mate. The best singer wins the heart of the female. (With this in mind, it seems surprising that many human males only sing when they are in a soccer stadium.)

O.k., back to the birds. The first reason for them to sing is to attract a mate. The second reason is they mark their territory with their singing. We tend to speak of being "free as a bird", but most birds aren't as free as it may seem to us. There are clear boundaries, even if they are invisible to us. With his singing, the birds tells his rivals to keep away from his territory: My territory is as large as my singing can be heard. Don't you dare get any closer.

The scientists say it must have been quite similar among primeval peoples, among our stone age ancestors, and possibly among some indigenous peoples in more recent times, when they danced their war dances and sang their war hymns.

These war hymns served two main purposes – one for within and one for without:

On one side, they helped the members of the group form a strong bond within and identify with their group.

On the other side, they helped the group distinguish itself from its enemies. By your song, I can tell that you are not part of my group. Our hymns sound different from yours.

By your song, I can tell if you are friend or foe. When I hear this beautiful familiar singing, I know these are friends, these are members of my own group. When I hear this strange-sounding singing, I know I have got to be careful, this is a different group.

Strange as this whole concept sounded at the beginning, now it starts to make sense. The kind of music we listen to defines who we are, what group we belong to. That is the same thing to this day.

Those young people who listen to that horrible style of music, they want to identify with their peers, they want to form their own group. And they do this by setting audio boundaries, so to speak, to the older generation who listens to a different style of music.

It may be comforting to realize is that this has never been any different.

The generation that used to dance and listen to the well-behaved minuet was disgusted when the youth started to dance the waltz. Such a frivolous, improper dance! That music, how horrible!

The generation that used to dance and listen to the well-behaved waltz was disgusted when the youth started to dance the tango. Such a frivolous, improper dance! That music, how horrible!

Or take the composers of our beautiful traditional hymns. Maybe you are familiar with the hymn "In thee is gladness amid all sadness" (German: In dir ist Freude). I am sure some people were offended when this was first sung in churches. Why, you may ask, what is wrong with that beautiful song?

Well, easy: The tune was more or less a pop song back then. We can imagine this tune being heard in bars and pubs. But the lyrics were very different: "On bright days, oh how my heart flutters". And where our hymn now sings the pious words "you the true Redeemer are", they would sing the profound lyrics "Fa la lalala la la la".

What the poet did was as if we would take a song by – I don't know, I'll have to admit that am not well-versed in modern pop music – let's say, Michael Jackson, and put new lyrics on that and sing it in church. Not sure how you would react to that!

"In thee is gladness", that was a dance song! Dancing in church? That was so totally improper, and basically, in many places, it still is up to this day. There may be small groups cultivating something called meditative dancing, but I think we can be reasonably sure that the people singing "On bright days, oh how my heart flutters" were not doing meditative dancing.

Not more than a couple of years ago, there was an outcry leading to a court decision about a couple of singers because they had behaved improperly in a church, "throwing their arms and legs in indecent ways". The same church, incidentally, that today blesses weapons and soldiers for an invasive war into another country. Quite honestly, I'd rather have people throw their arms and legs.

And so did our hymn composers and poets even way back in the 16th century. It may not feel natural to our stiff Northern German temper, but come to think of it, there are so many churches all over the world where God is praised not only with the voice but with the whole body.

So, back to the different music tastes in different groups and different generations: Maybe it is some comfort to know that this conflict between generations is not new. This is not something that only you and your parents or you and your children have to go through. Good old Socrates complained about the youth of his time 3000 years ago. Maybe he simply didn't like their singing, who knows.

The music I hear and sing has to do with the group I belong to, and with the groups I DON'T belong to. We sometimes try hard in our services to please everyone and find music that will appeal to everyone. We are bound to fail with that attempt.

When the organ plays, people who love organ music will love it, and when we have a band playing in church, those people will get out their earplugs or stay away. And vice versa. And contrary to common belief, this is not a matter of

volume. Our brass choir and our organ too can achieve a surprising decibel level, possibly more than most bands playing in church will use. It's not a matter of volume, it's a matter of the style of music which forms a group or which forms boundaries.

So, here's the critical question: What is it that forms our group? Why are we here today, why do we belong together in worship or in a congregation? Is this only because we set boundaries to the outside, to those who listen to *different* styles of music? I hope not.

Our identity as a group, as a congregation of worshippers is not formed by setting up boundaries against others. Our identity is formed by what we believe, by our faith in Jesus Christ. And at the same time we want to be open and welcoming toward others. Can that be possible?

Now sometimes a misunderstood concept of tolerance is not having any identity at all. That's not what I mean. If I don't have a position and an identity, I am not being tolerant, I am being indifferent.

Having a strong bond in our group, in our fellowship of worshipping by our singing and our music, and at the same time being open for others. This is not easy. It is the question of how we deal with people who are different than we are. Do we tell them: You have to adapt to our tastes?

A group that forms its identity solely by setting boundaries is led by its fears. Feeling the need to keep others at a distance usually has to do with our fears. A strong community, on the other hand, can afford to be open. It will not lose its identity by opening up to different tastes.

Because our identity as Christians is not based on a common taste. It is the content that forms us as a group, as a congregation.

The style is merely a matter of taste. We can afford to be generous and tolerant when it comes to style. It's the content that counts. So that's what we need to listen to in our songs.

Am I going to like it when the gospel is sung in the style of heavy metal? Absolutely not. But I can be open and joyful that people who love that style of music will hear the gospel in a style that appeals to them. I am probably not going to attend a heavy metal service (or with my earplugs only), but I can tolerate what they are doing, and not only tolerate it, but rejoice that they are hearing the gospel in a way that they will understand.

We do not need to set boundaries and to mark our territory. We can open up and tolerate each other's tastes. I don't need to love their style of music. But I can accept that their singing is praising the gospel too.

Let's open up our ears and listen not only to the style but to the message. Because it's the content that counts.

Amen.