



**VILLAGE  
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

## Hymns & Songs

SCRIPTURE:  
Exodus 15:  
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April 21, 2024 — Sermon by Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka

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**T**wo-hundred and fifteen years. That's how long the Hebrews had been in Egypt as slaves according to the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus who wrote the "Antiquities of the Jews" in the first century.

Two hundred and fifteen years. Then God hears the cries of the Hebrew people and calls Moses and his older brother Aaron and older sister Miriam to go to Pharaoh and tell them to free the Hebrews. Pharaoh's heart is hardened against God and against Moses so he refuses over and over again and God sends 10 plagues upon the Egyptians (water turning to blood, frogs, lice, flies, death of livestock, boils, hail and fire, locusts, darkness, death of firstborns).

Then finally, Pharaoh sets them free. Exodus says 600,000 men (Exodus 12:37) are freed. Bible scholars say, that when you add women and children, we're talking about nearly two million people. So they go but it takes them awhile. And then Pharaoh seems to change his mind and sends his army after them either to kill them or bring them back or both and the Hebrews are terrified. They come to the Red Sea and they think they are all going to die but, lo and behold, Moses stretches out his hand and the waters of the Red Sea part and the Israelites cross the sea! But Pharaoh's army follows them. Then God tells Moses to stretch out his hand again and the water comes crashing down upon the whole Egyptian army and they are all drowned and now the Hebrews are safe on the other side of the Red sea. And the first thing they do? Sing! That's right. Scholars say this is the first recorded moment of congregational song.

This is called the song of Moses. "I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and rider thrown into the sea. The Lord is my strength and my might and God has become my salvation.

This is my God and I will praise God. The God of my ancestors and I will exalt God. The Lord is a warrior. The Lord is God's name! The Lord will reign forever!"

We are in this sermon series on the ways we worship. We are looking at the different elements of our worship service. Rev. Alice Whitson started us off two weeks ago looking at the Call to Worship. Last week, Rev. Chad Herring helped us explore the Confession of Sin and Assurance of Pardon. Today we look at music—at our hymns and songs. And I am delighted that we have two world-renowned experts to help us.

Dr. Elisa Bickers and Dr. Josh Maize serve as our interim co-directors of music ministry at our Mission campus. Elisa joined us in 2009 so she has been with us for 15 years. She earned her undergraduate and master's degrees in music from Texas Christian University in Ft. Worth and her doctoral degree in church music and organ performance from the University of Kansas. Josh joined our staff in 2021 and earned his undergraduate, master's and doctoral degree in choral conducting from the University of Missouri Kansas City conservatory of music and dance. I have asked them to help us and they have both agreed.<sup>1</sup> [Panel discussion follows.]

Rodger: "Tell us a little about yourselves—how and when did you know that music was an essential part of who you are?"

Elisa: "I grew up in a household completely surrounded by music. My father was forever playing the Everly Brothers and Peter, Paul, and Mary on eight-track and record for us. We were a folk-music family. And both of my grandmothers were church organists. So it was just always there. And when my mother finally let me take piano lessons at age eight, there was no turning back. Music was with me forever."

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<sup>1</sup> At the 5 p.m. service, Becky and Nathan Bliss, co-directors for music for the Gathering, participated in the panel. You can find that video at [villagepres.org/ways-we-worship](https://villagepres.org/ways-we-worship).

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Josh: “I discovered music at a young age, although my family is not very musical. My grandmother plays piano so when I was really little, I used to accompany her to her piano lessons and I would just sit in the corner and color. I guess that sort of sparked an interest in music. And then, I started taking piano lessons and in high school, by accident, I sort of got pushed into choir and realized I really liked choir! I knew at that moment that music was going to be my path in some way. So by late adolescence is when I discovered that.”

Rodger: “How would you describe the place of music in worship?”

Elisa: “I can’t remember who said it, but somebody once told me, nobody walks out of church humming the sermon. It’s true, isn’t it? You know, we take from this building, from this hour-long experience together, lessons that come to us in a variety of forms. And our hope when we choose the music around here and work with our wonderful volunteers, is that it will be a wholesome reflection of the lessons that we were hoping to learn. For example, today is about singing and hymnody, but tomorrow is also Earth Day. So we chose hymns that had lots of references to natural creation and singing praises in creation—hoping to tie those two themes together. So that when you leave this building, you’re thinking back to that tune you sang, that praise you sang or that prayer you sang, and you’ll bring it with you through the rest of the week.”

Josh: “I will piggyback off of that. We have this amazing book here and I think it’s easy to take it for granted, right? For a lot of us, the only time we encounter this thing is on Sunday morning when we’re in this room, right? But this is such an incredible resource. These are our songs of faith. There are hymns and songs in here from decades ago, and there are songs and hymns in here that were written in the last 10 years. It’s wonderful to see the historical significance and progression of these words and tunes that bring us together every Sunday morning. So I would encourage you (maybe not during the sermon!) to flip through the hymnal and familiarize yourself with these texts and tunes. Of course, we need to remember that the word ‘hymn’ refers to the words not the tune. There are hymn tunes and there are hymn texts. Usually when we we’re

talking hymns, we think of the music, but really what we’re talking about are the words. If you look at the bottom of each of our hymns, there’s these cool little snippets or fun facts that tell a little about the history, authors or composers and the origins of the tunes. So, familiarize yourself with our hymnal. It’s such a wonderful resource.”

Rodger: “One of my truths is that ‘we sing what we believe and we believe what we sing.’ Reflect on that with me.”

Elisa: “I think it’s true sometimes, maybe more often for me, the things that I sing are the things that I wish I believed. It’s something that I need to be reminded about. Perhaps when the world seems to be more on fire than usual, or I feel more alone than ever before, I can find some wonderful thing in this book that says: No, you’re not alone, and don’t you forget to keep the faith and here’s why. So I respect that truth, but I also think hymns can be something we strive toward. It’s a reminder: Don’t forget this about your faith or about your neighbor, or about your place in the world.”

Josh: “What’s so great about where we are as the Presbyterian Church in 2024—and particularly with this new-ish hymnal—is that we’re seeing so much more diversity in voices, more inclusive language, and modern or more up-to-date theology. But we haven’t abandoned a lot of the hymns that a lot of us grew up with and have such strong emotional attachments to. It’s such a beautiful blending of our faith. And there’s a song and there’s a tune and there’s a text for almost every moment. The diversity in this book is just amazing.”

Rodger: “What is your personal hope about the role that music plays in our worship?”

Josh: “My personal hope is that you all will sing. It doesn’t matter how good or bad you think your voice is. God gave us all the ability to sing—to sustain pitch. I would encourage you to just sing. It is a beautiful thing we get to do. We come together in this room. We sit in pews. There’s nothing dividing you and your neighbor, right? We are together, we breathe together and we can sing together. It takes air to sing. Everybody take a breath and let it out. You hear that inhale and exhale? We need air to be able to sing and to do that collectively is such a beautiful, unique thing. I would encourage you to be

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brave and sing. Nobody is judging you or critiquing your voice. It doesn't matter. Use your voice."

Elisa: "Amid the many signals that bombard us every day, we get the one that says that individuality is to be prized above all else. Actually, maybe, it isn't. Maybe we need to come together more often and share in experiences and harmonize and sing in unison. And when we sing together, that stands against that outward value. And it says, instead, I'm going come over here and look for my neighbors to be a community with me. When we sing together, we

are unified. And I think that's something that this world needs more than anything else right now."

Rodger: "Beautifully said."

After the single-most significant event in the history of the Hebrew people—to this point, in their history—what do they do? They sing!

We sing what we believe and we believe what we sing and when we sing, we join our voices in a long line of the faithful that stretches more than 4,000 years. So let's sing. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.