

## \* Days of Elijah

Having a pastor with some musical background, you have probably come to realize by now that worship music is very important to me. I would say, in fact, that I have a rather ‘exalted’ opinion of how significantly music choices and musical selections impact worship – either in a positive or negative way. (I.e., Music can ‘make or break’ a service). I also am, in that regard, in a ‘dream job’ here, so to speak, in that I get to participate in and plan four different worship experiences every week. I don’t have to ‘choose’ between them.

I grew up with traditional worship (really, there wasn’t anything else at the time!), and as a horn player, and aspiring guitarist, I got in early on the Contemporary worship movement, which I’ve learned to appreciate as well. As I’ve grown as a Christian, I’ve come to understand my roots a little bit better, especially in studying liturgy and liturgical history in Seminary; but at this point in my life, I would say I have a deeper appreciation for liturgy – the structure of worship – than ever before. And I get to participate in a variety of worship experiences – every week. Quite a blessing!

A few years ago, when I was first introduced into the “Natural Church Development” concept of testing and determining what a ‘healthy’ church looked like, I think a lot of people were surprised to discover that in this extensive (NCD) study of all the factors which made a Church either healthy or unhealthy, that *worship style* was not even considered to be a relevant factor! I.e., they came to the conclusion, in their study of over 50,000 churches worldwide that there were lots of churches that were healthy – meaning they were providing fertile ground in which the Holy Spirit could bring about growth in all the measurable health ‘categories’ – regardless of their worship style preference. So, they found healthy churches who worshipped in formal ways, informal, contemporary, traditional, high, low, and every other label possible. And, conversely, they found that there are *unhealthy* churches that hold services, again, in every imaginable style. And in every denomination, too.

Because of my deep appreciation for *a number* of worship styles, and seeing the strengths and value in each one, I like to help us all experience some new things occasionally – new opportunities.

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Now, I have no intention of evolving our four services somewhere down the line into one single homogeneous *mess* (which is what would emerge if we were to try that!) nonetheless (and this may be obvious to you) I have been thoughtfully and prayerfully (and in consultation with Glenn and HeyYoung) introducing occasional elements of one or another ‘items’ into a different worship setting. (“Cross- pollen-ization” if you will!)

For example, for well over a year, we have been frequently using a more formal Call to Worship and Invocation (opening prayer) in both of our Contemporary services. (The same ones that we use in our 11:00 service.) Once in while, we’ll include a unison Scripture reading or a responsive reading of a Psalm in those services as well. And ever since I started picking music for the contemporary services here, we have frequently introduced traditional hymns to that portion of our community. Many of these hymns and songs are very old, but the message in them is relevant and powerful and I think we need to sing them, so we do!

Likewise we have been using the video screen and multimedia in all services, (to a very positive response, btw), and we occasionally will sing some of our more contemporary songs in our traditional services – particularly as prayer responses. Some of them – just like the traditional hymns @ 9:30, are just worth singing. [Songs like “By Our Love”, and “See What A Morning”, et al.] And other special services that we celebrate here (like Holy Thursday and the Good Friday Tenebrae services, and in our Taize worship, we provide a cross section of our congregation a chance to experience other forms of worship that we utilize in this community of faith. All very intentional, and I believe, it helps us grow – in our faith and as a community.



"They're putting choruses in hymnbooks and projecting hymns onto the screen. It's getting so I can't remember what I'm not supposed to like!"

Now, I realize that this can be a little confusing sometimes, as illustrated by this cartoon that someone sent me recently: [\*]

[\* **blank**]

Anyway, many of our “new” *songs* of worship are not always so ...*new*. They are, many of them, songs with lyrics taken out of Scripture. These contemporary pieces are fashioned after the great psalms of David ...or Moses, etc.

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These psalms (or songs) were written out of *experience* with God. (Which, of course, is also true for many of our hymns as well.)

For example, when David sinned with Bathsheba (see 2 Samuel 11) and was called on the carpet by the prophet Nathan, this “friend of God” wrote what we have recorded in our Bibles as Psalm 51. If you have never read the Psalm, chances are you’ve at least sung the opening line:

*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love....*

We sing a lot of these type songs. Singing the words of these songs is one thing. And I’ve been saying this about our great hymns for a very long time: more important, is *knowing* what they mean – and sometimes that is something else entirely.

So with that in mind, I’d like to talk with you a little bit about a popular contemporary Christian worship song that was written in the mid- 90s by a guy named Robin Mark. A song that, even though we have not sung it in our 8:30 & 11:00 services (until today!) I think it is likely that most of you have heard it, anyway. The song is called: **Days of Elijah.**

*Here’s the Lyrics:*

\* These are the days of Elijah, declaring the Word of the Lord;  
And these are the days of Your servant, Moses,  
righteousness being restored;  
And though these are days of great trials, of famine and darkness and sword;  
Still, we are the voice in the desert crying, “Prepare ye the way of the Lord.”

*\* Behold He comes, riding on the clouds,  
shining like the sun at the trumpet call;  
so lift your voice, it’s the year of Jubilee,  
and out of Zion’s hill salvation comes.*

\* And these are the days of Ezekiel, the dry bones becoming as flesh;  
and these are the days of Your servant, David, rebuilding a temple of praise;  
and these are the days of the harvest, The fields are white in the world;  
and we are Your laborers in Your vineyard, declaring the Word of the Lord.

\* [chorus again] (1996 Daybreak Music Ltd.)

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The composer, Robin Mark, is a native of Belfast, Northern Ireland (which makes another song we sang this morning @ 930 – “Come Heal This Land” all the more interesting!) Mark believes, as I do, as well, that the Old Testament stories are as relevant today in what they can teach us, as they were when they were experienced and first told. Many of them are disturbing, for sure, but they tend to reveal a lot about us as human beings trying to hear God.

[\*] Having watched a television special that included footage about the Rwandan civil war, Robin Mark wondered to himself if God was truly “in control” of this world. [I have to tell you, I had a similar response just over two years ago as my eyes were finally opened to the horror of the Rwandan genocide, 25 years late, as I heard someone speak about it who was *there* at the time. And then I read his book. You probably know, that this was something that was perpetrated for the most part, between Christians. I was kind of ashamed of myself, for *not even noticing* that it was going on. It began the week after Easter, in April of 1994, and lasted about 100 days. In that time, over 800,000 people were slaughtered, while the world, for the most part, looked away.

If anything could make that *more* disturbing, it is this: at that time Rwanda was considered to be the ‘most Christian nation’ in Africa, perhaps in the world. What is hard to grasp, even today, is that this was ‘Christians killing Christians’. The same congregations that together were praising the living Resurrected Jesus, on Easter, went out less than a week later and began a horrific 100 day killing frenzy. Pastors turning against their congregations, friends betraying friends. Deeply, deeply disturbing. ]

[\* **blank**] So Robin Mark thought about that, too, and he prayed – God, where were you in all this? Are you really in control? He waited for God’s reply, which he heard as “yes!” God is very much in control. But these were also days when we, as Christians, need to have the boldness of Elijah... to declare the words of the Lord in a world and to a people who have sought after other gods... other means of worship. People who are lost, hurting, and deeply confused – many, perhaps who consider themselves to be believers.

It’s a powerful message, and after the anointing of God’s presence that we experienced in last week’s Missions Conference, and looking ahead to our celebration of what God has been doing

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in and through this congregation through our “Living Radical Hospitality” emphasis, there are some implications in the message of this song that I’d like to talk about with you today, and then I’d like us to sing the song, after we humble ourselves and receive holy Communion.

So let’s start here: Who was Elijah, anyway?

Elijah was a prophet that we first read about in the book of 1 Kings. The nation of Israel, who was by now divided from the kingdom of Judah, had a king named Ahab. Among all the evil kings that the northern kingdom suffered (practically all of them) Ahab was perhaps the worst of all. He was a wicked man in many ways, and the height of his wickedness was in his marriage to a woman named Jezebel.

Jezebel worshipped the local Canaanite god Baal and brought that worship into Israel. Ahab

[\* ] followed her and in a big way. 1 Kings 16: 33 we read, “*Ahab...did more to provoke the Lord, the God of Israel, to anger than did all the kings of Israel before him.*”

During Ahab’s reign, Elijah prophesized that a drought would come to the land...and a drought came! Three years later Elijah went to Ahab on God’s orders. Ahab (and Israel) was near-frantic; they were desperate for water. When Ahab saw Elijah, he called out to him, “*Is that you, you troubler of Israel?*” (1 Kings 18:17).

[\*] This led to one of the great stories in the Old Testament: a show-down of epic proportions on Mount Carmel. (For the full story, read 1 Kings 18: 16-41) [This, by the way, was the subject of my very first sermon.] It turned out that there was no contest – God proved himself to the people of Israel, and the Baal prophets were exposed. And people turned to God.

Years later, again prompted by God, Elijah boldly approached the king and queen after they’d killed an innocent vineyard owner so as to “steal” his land. (1 Kings 21)

“*You did evil in the eyes of the Lord,*” Elijah told Ahab. And he went on to predict the defeat and ultimate death of both Ahab and Jezebel (1 Kings 21: 21-24).

Well, his words so rattled Ahab that he repented. The Bible tells us that Ahab tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and fasted. He even acted meekly! And because of that, God held off on *his* day

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of disaster until the days of the kingdom of Ahab's son. But Jezebel met her gruesome end as predicted.

These were not the only times that Elijah loudly and boldly proclaimed the Voice of the Lord. He had his moments of doubt and weakness, too, but he was the great prophet of Israel...

Now, fast-forward hundreds of years, and we find another prophet crying out to God's people. His name was John, and we call him 'the Baptizer'.

*[\*] Now this was John's testimony when the Jews of Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, "I am not the Christ." They asked him, "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" He answered, "No." Finally they said, "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"*

*[\*] John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, "I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'" ~John 1: 19-23*

John's prophecy is referred to in the chorus of this song: ("Prepare ye the way of the Lord.")

In the song, other Biblical figures are mentioned, besides Elijah, and this allusion to John.

- **[\*] Moses**, who restored righteousness to the people of Israel by reintroducing them to relationship with God and who established, by God's finger, the law that would serve as a covenant between Him and them.
- **[\*] Ezekiel**, who prophesized over a valley of dry bones, and watched as God brought them together — bone to bone — and then filled in with tendons and flesh and, finally, breath. God declares to Ezekiel that, like the bones, his people Israel will be restored as a nation and as His people. This is a prophecy that certainly came true literally after the Exile, and according to the Apostle Paul, has found a wider fulfillment in the "new Israel", i.e., the Church, us.
- **[\*] David**, the one who inspired (although he did not build) the first temple in Jerusalem. He also was the one who returned the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. Robin Mark's song however, refers to David's "temple of praise," meaning the temple inside you and me, where the Holy Spirit dwells.

### So what's the point of the song?

*[\*]* What I get out of this song is a picture of great privilege. Which is why, when I sing it, it is such a joyful thing to me. *We* – you, and me – we are living in the days that each of these great people of God looked forward to! What they hoped for, saw as a distant mist in the future, we are experiencing today!

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As Elijah himself called his nation to righteousness, some listened, and many did not. John the Baptist came in the Spirit of Elijah, (according to Jesus himself), preparing the way for the One who would finally make real righteousness possible. Not by producing a batch of ‘perfect people’, but by providing a way to be righteous through forgiveness, through faith.

Moses ‘connected the covenant people to God’ through the giving of the Law – a Law (as we’ve talked about many times) that we *cannot* keep; yet in fulfillment of that very Law, Jesus came to redeem those who were under the Law. So the Day that Moses looked for, has come – it is now!

In that sense, *these are* the days of Elijah, and David, and Moses... the message of the Good News of Jesus is being shared in every corner of the world! God is doing amazing things all over this globe – people are being healed, and finding lasting peace, forgiveness, and purpose for their lives. Truly, as Jesus said, “The fields are white with harvest”. There is more to do.

The main point of this song, I think, is to get us to consider what we are willing to do as believers in Christ in this period of the world’s history. It will not last – Jesus said that he would return. And, you don’t need to go overboard with speculation about bible prophecy to believe that his return may well be soon.

In Mark 14, Jesus was being questioned by the High Priest at his trial.

*Again the high priest asked him, “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?”<sup>62</sup> “I am,” said Jesus. “And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.”*

See, we have work to do – we have a mission. We bear the privilege and the responsibility to share the love of Jesus Christ with a hurting world through words and actions. In two weeks we are going to share with you a new professionally filmed DVD that tells some of the story of how that is happening in this church community, stimulated by the new construction. We thought that we would adapt our programming around a new facility, but we had no idea that through this building God would change our church. And he has (and is!). I can’t wait for you to see it.

We had \$63,000 pledged in Faith Promise funds last week. Praise the Lord! Because of that, and because of your faithfulness in your regular budget giving, we will continue to be able to support

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people like this wonderful couple B. J. and Andrea Williamson to help send them back to Ecuador – a place for which God has planted an obvious and deep love in their hearts. We will be part of the work of changing young lives, one at a time, through Urban Promise, giving hope in a desperate situations to people right next door to us in Camden. And in so many other ways...

We will send people into the mission field – in short term missions (a return trip to Four Corners, NM in July and an ASP trip with 60+ people to Mingo County, WV), and we will serve our world right from this church – through ministries like Divorce Care, Grief Share, ESL, DK4K, Interfaith Hospitality Network, Sunday Schools, Youth Ministries, Kate’s Place, by providing a real welcome into all of our worship services, through outreaches like VBS (which people are already asking about), First Light preschool... and on and on...

I hear so many people say (I’ve said it myself) “This is an amazing Church!” (I heard that a lot last weekend.) Well, it is; but only because God is an amazing God. And we are simply people who are learning to understand -

“That though these are days of great trials, of famine and darkness and sword;  
Still we are the voice in the desert crying, ‘Prepare ye the way of the Lord.’”

Are you ready to gather in the harvest? Are you ready to shout, - through your words and your actions - “Prepare ye the way of the Lord!”?

[\*] *Behold He comes,  
riding on the clouds,  
shining like the sun at the trumpet call;  
so lift your voice,  
it’s the year of Jubilee,  
and out of Zion’s hill salvation comes.*

Amen