

To Soothe the Soul

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, January 18, 2026, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [1 Samuel 16:14-23](#) and [Psalm 40:1-11](#)

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We don't spend all that much time in 1 and 2 Samuel, even less in 1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Chronicles. So, here's a quick review of what's gone on so far in the Bible.

Genesis covers creation (in two versions), a couple stories that remain important in western European literature (the Noah story and the Tower of Babel story), and the Abraham/Sarah saga (from Abraham and Sarah's call to head west to a "promised land" to the stories of their great-grandsons moving their families to Egypt because of a famine).

The next four books of the Bible (that is, the other books of the Torah) cover the exodus from Egypt to the edge of what the Hebrew people still thought was a "promised land." During the exodus, God gives the Hebrew people a whole bunch of rules to follow. That's one reason why it takes four books.

The book of Joshua tells about the conquest or colonization of this "promised land." Judges tells us stories about the Hebrew people and how they lived as a confederation of tribes. Ruth tells a quick story about how a Moabite woman became part of the Hebrew people (so she could become the great-grandmother of King David – not that we have any kings yet).

And then we get to 1 Samuel. 1 Samuel starts with the birth of Samuel and his dedication to serve the high priest Eli. During this time of service, Samuel grows in his faith and knowledge of God. By chapter 8 Samuel has become the prophetic-religious-leader of the Hebrew people, and those people (after a defeat at the hands of the Philistines) decide they need to be unified under a king. Samuel says that's a bad idea. Nonetheless, the people insist and Samuel (under God's direction) selects Saul to be their king.

Saul's reign starts off well enough, but by chapter 15, God's support of Saul is withdrawn. Saul starts having what we might today call depressive episodes. David (whom Samuel has already secretly anointed as the next king) is brought into the court the play music for the suffering Saul. David's music seems to be one of the only things that can soothe Saul's troubled soul.

While it may be of some comfort to people who live with chronic mental health conditions to find people in the Bible who have symptoms similar to their own, it seems a bit strange to me try to diagnose a biblical character's mental health based on a few stories in the Bible. Nonetheless, there have been serious articles published in medical journals about various biblical characters. One I read¹ in preparation for this sermon claims, based on this passage and two others (in 1 Samuel 10 and 19), that Saul was more likely to have

¹ George Stein, "The case of King Saul: did he have recurrent unipolar depression or bipolar affective disorder?" *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/the-british-journal-of-psychiatry/article/case-of-king-saul-did-he-have-recurrent-unipolar-depression-or-bipolar-affective-disorder/CE7DBD20965E98FC29A2445C0E620DAD> (posted 2 January 2019; accessed 17 January 2026).

had bipolar affective disorder than to have had unipolar depression. Of much greater importance to me than a diagnosis is the idea that, in a time when people did not have the assistance of modern medications and therapy, music could be of assistance in symptom management, that music could (and still can) soothe the soul.

We hear echoes of this in today's Psalm.

I waited patiently for the Lord;
God inclined to me and heard my cry.
God drew me up from the desolate pit,
out of the miry bog,
and set my feet upon a rock,
making my steps secure.
God put a new song in my mouth,
a song of praise to our God.²

Here, the song seems to come second. "God drew me out of the miry bog ..." Boy that's an image. I imagine waking through a wet, muddy mush, where each step sinks in knee deep and lifting my foot to take my next step means fighting the suction of the mud. "God drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure." And once my steps are secure and not nearly as tiring, "God put a new song in my mouth."

Sometimes the music soothes the soul and relieves the symptoms, and sometimes the music comes from the joy of a revived heart and pours forth as praise.

I suspect that most of us, and maybe even all of us, have had an experience where listening to a piece of music and having our souls soothed, or when we experienced a soothing that led us to a piece of music.

Adriana Barton, a health journalist, did a deep dive into music and the brain a few years back and wrote a book about what she discovered: *Wired for Music: A Search for Health and Joy Through the Science of Sound*. She says, "Most of us have music that makes us feel better... [It makes us feel better because] it stimulates dopamine in the brain."³

She says that if you're feeling stressed or anxious, "you want to choose the music you love most, and the reason is, that's the music that's going to stimulate the pleasure and reward circuitry in the brain. ... if you need to chill out and calm down, you want to choose music [that is] about the pace of a resting heartbeat, so that would be 60 to 80 beats per minute. That's going to reduce your heart rate and also lower your cortisol levels, which are the stress hormones."⁴

She says that "almost all of us are innately wired for music.... Even at birth, newborns' brains will respond to a strong beat and music in a way that macaque monkeys' brains do not."⁵

² Psalm 40:1-3a, *NRSVue* (adapted).

³ Andriana Barton in an interview on the TV talkshow *The Social*, posted on YouTube <https://youtu.be/iU3vWpLHnMo> about three years ago; accessed 17 January 2026.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

And for those of you who are saying, “Yeah, but I’m tone deaf,” you’re probably not. Only about 2% of the population is truly tone deaf. You might have trouble carrying a tune, but that’s because you don’t have enough practice carrying a tune. With the right coaching and practice, you can learn the vocal control, the ear, and the confidence to sing with others.⁶

Music is not something that happens only in the brain. “If you put someone in an MRI machine and they’re motionless ... and they’re listening to music, you will see that the motor region of the brain is activating as though they are dancing or moving to music. What more proof do you need to have ... [that] our bodies naturally want to move to music.”⁷ How sad that western European culture teaches us to sit still when we go to a concert in a concert hall or church, and no wonder people don’t tend to sit still at a rock concert.

“A lot of the gifts of music are social. Music really does connect us in ways that many other things do not.”⁸ Barton writes: “As adults, the bonding effects of music tend to fly under our radar. We don’t realize that when we see a musician playing, our brainwaves begin to match those of the performer. In a 2020 study, listeners who watched a video of a violinist playing pieces such as ‘Ave Maria’ and ‘Auld Lang Syne’ showed brain synchrony with the violinist, especially in a region that processes rhythmic sounds.

“The mirror effect turns up among musicians, too. Guitarists performing together show matching brain activity even if they’re playing different parts. This isn’t just a case of visual mimicry – monkey see, monkey do. Amateur singers don’t need to see each other’s faces for their brainwaves to entrain. Through music, noted the study on singers, ‘two brains make one synchronized mind.’”⁹

I know that singing in the Golden Gate Men’s Chorus is hugely valuable for me. It’s a big investment of time that pays big dividends. I spend seven hours on Tuesdays traveling to rehearsals, grabbing a quick dinner, rehearsing, and traveling home. In the process, I step away from my responsibilities as a pastor. That’s a dividend.

At rehearsal, I’m not in charge. I get to follow someone else’s directions. It is a creative endeavor that, because I’m not in charge, is different from any creative work I do being a pastor. That’s a dividend.

I get to be just one of the guys. I get to be Jeff the bass. That’s a dividend.

And we create beautiful music. That’s a dividend.

In any given concert set, I connect with some music more than other music. I’ll almost always have a favorite piece. It’s almost always a piece that connects to my soul. And I get to laugh about how my favorite piece is often one of the least favorites of one particular friend in the chorus.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Adriana Barton in an interview for the *Banyan Books and Sound* podcast, posted on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/live/MNIu5eEk76c> about three years ago; accessed 17 January 2026.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Quoted by my friend Fred Cummins in an email he sent to me on 21 June 2025, from Adriana Barton’s book (pp 162-163).

There is also something about working together and supporting each other that is powerful. A choir can sing a beautiful note for an impossibly long length of time because one singer can drop out and grab a breath while the other singers keep singing, carrying that note. Each singer can breathe when necessary, and the note goes on. There's a powerful metaphor there. That's what needs to happen in the struggle for justice and peace. We need to take turns breathing as we make sure the note carries on.

With all of these things I've talked about – the power of music to soothe the soul, the power of music to be a response to joy, the power of music to build connection and community – is there any wonder that music is an important part of social justice work.

Sometimes that music will include dance – as in [this dance](#) in the streets of Minneapolis these past weeks. Notice that this music has no melody.

Sometimes that music will have a heritage that connects the present moment to past struggles.

We shall overcome. We shall overcome.

We shall overcome some day.

Ohhhh deep in my heart I do believe:

We shall overcome some day.

And some days the music needs to be new to meet the moment – as in [this song](#) from the streets of Minneapolis these past weeks.

Music can empower us. Music can connect us. Music can influence the way our brains work. Music can soothe the soul.

As a form of spiritual self care, I invite you to look at your playlist this week. What music empowers you? What music gives you hope? What music connects you? What music soothes your soul? Spend some time with each type of music.

It is our practice to offer you some questions to reflect on after the sermon. Instead, today, I invite you to rest in an instrumental piece of music. You might even want to close your eyes. I hope it soothes your soul.

<https://youtu.be/TJ6Mzvh3XCc>