

Sweet Songs at Midnight

A Sermon by June R. Cooper

Acts 16:16-28

Waiting is hard. It is particularly hard when you are a teenager. We waited for a full two weeks for the answer. I was one of the 12 teens in our Baptist church who wanted to form a gospel choir. We were waiting for a decision to be made by the Church Deacons as to whether we could have the choir or not. It was in the mid-60's and our little Northern black Baptist church was content with its Eurocentric worship style of hymns and anthems, and a few spirituals.

But things were about to change. The Deacons said yes, and the Youth Gospel choir was formed, and we never looked back. This new style of music – gospel – had a beat (2 -4 beat). We clapped to the rhythm of the beat, and we had a little rock and sway in our step. It was very different from anything I'd experienced at church.

Invitations poured in for the choir to sing at worship services and church conventions from around the state. One of our best songs was, "Oh, Oh, Oh, Oh what He's done for, I never shall forget what he has done for me. He lifted my feet from the muddy clay..." Yes, I wanted to sing gospel music.

As a child of the 60's, Gospel music was in the air. Gospel music which comes of age in the 1930's was the soundtrack for the Civil Rights Movement. The Spirit of God in the music ignited and inspired African Americans to "move up a little higher."

The music gave courage to face down powerful white resistance which came in the form of violence (dogs, firehose, bombings, death threats and yes, and the slaughtering of the innocent) to win the rights promised to African American people by the Constitution of the United States of America. Fueled by Fannie Lou Hamer's, rallying cry, or catchphrase, " I am sick and tired of being sick and tired " gospel songs like, **"I do not feel no ways tired, we have come to far from where we started from, nobody told me that the road would be easy, I do not believe He brought us this far to leave me"** and **"I am going to stay on the battle field for my Lord,"** infused the hearts of the foot soldiers.

Rooted in the rich tradition of the African American church and the lived experiences of African American people, Black Gospel music speaks to Christian hope, emancipation, deliverance and redemption.

Through its lyrics which speak of joy and sorrow, hope and despair and a better life and rhythms which take us back to African roots and spirituality, Gospel music identifies with the social circumstances of a people who continue to face systemic inequality and disenfranchisement and all that comes along with hatred, rejection, disrespect, police brutality and violence.

Gospel music is in the DNA of many African American people, because it speaks to the souls of people who live in sorrow's house. If you have ever lived in sorrow's house, regardless of your skin color, you learn how to sympathize with others, you learn about tears of joy and pain, you learn about forgiveness, you learn how to be human, you learn how to trust God! You know about struggle and resistance. Gospel music is inseparable from God and the Holy Spirit.

The singing and receiving of Gospel music is an experience. It engages the body, the mind and the spirit. I do not know about you but when I hear gospel music – I can feel the spirit of God moving. The Spirit moves through the music and feeds my soul. This music makes you want to move, it makes me want to sing along sometime, it makes you want to just stand up and testify, it makes you want to clap your hands, it makes we want to shout, hallelujah, and move into a Holy Ghost praise dance, like King David did into the presence of God.

Gospel music is a gift from God who gives sweet songs in at midnight. Job asked, where is God who gives sweet songs in the night? Gospel music is a gift from a God who cared enough to put on flesh and steps into our struggle and sits with those who have been rejected and walks with those who have been dismissed and eats with those who are deemed unworthy.

Now I want you to go with me in your imagination to the City of Phillip. There we learn that Paul and Silas have been arrested and beaten and thrown into jail, as the penalty of Roman justice. They had no influential friends in the city to call or text. There was no one who could make a difference. They had done no wrong. They preached Jesus Christ, **who came not to turn the world upside down, but right side up.**

They were thrown into a dark unlight prison cell, just about that time of day when the sun goes down from the sky, when the shadow of darkness gathers- nighttime.

What do you do when your back is against the wall? Who do you turn to?

Paul and Silas did what was best. They prayed and sang sweet songs to God their creator.

The scripture tells us that it was at midnight. It was at midnight when the City of Phillip hear a strange sound, they heard a new sound. The city and the jailers heard the sweet songs, that God gives at midnight. Midnight, when the light is far away and it seems that morning time will now come soon enough.

Paul and Silas prayed and sang in the jail house. They sang with their handcuffs on and leg irons- holding them to the wall. I do not know what they sang, but I can imagine that they sang,

They might have turned to the Psalms, Israel's hymnal, and sang, **Total Praise**, "Lord I will lift mine eyes to the hills knowing my help is coming from you. Your peace you give me in time of the storm. You are my source of my strength you are the strength of my life; I lift my hands in total praise to you."

I can imagine they sang, **How I Got Over** a song written by Clara Ward as she and members of her singing group were besieged by a group of white men as they were traveling in the racially segregated South in 1951.

I can imagine that they sang, **There's a sweet spirit in this place, and I know it is the presence of the Lord.**

I do not know what they sang, but Paul and Silas sang and sang until their shackles fell from their hands and feet. They became unbound. They sang until God called down the mercy seat. They sang!

Paul and Silas and our African Ancestors knew where to turn when they came up against something that was bigger than themselves, and when hope has faded and seems to be in short supply. They turned to God who gives a sweet song at midnight.

You and I, need a song that lifts us toward God, from whatever our condition may be, a song that provides for us the wisdom and the power, the courage and the fortitude to endure, and to run without getting weary, and to walk without fainting.

My prayer is that the God of history will continue to give us sweet songs at Midnight that will cause us to call on God and say, “precious Lord take my hand, lead me on, help me stand; I am tired, I am weak, I am worn; through the storm, through the night, lead me on to the light, take my hand, precious Lord, lead me on.”

