"Blues In The Night"

Written By Rev. Suzanne Meyer

Ireland's venerable rock band U2 is led by singer Bono. If you are not a rock fan you may know him as the debt relief advocate, a socially conscious musician, "the most secular of saints" according to Time magazine, and the winner of four Grammy Awards. Improbable as it may seem, he is also the author of an introduction to the Hebrew Psalms. As it turns out, Bono is a longtime fan of King David, the ancient Hebrew ruler who is said to have written the Psalms. This is an excerpt from Bono's introduction to the Psalms, published by Grove Press.

Bono recalls: “At age 12, I was a fan of David. He felt familiar, like a pop star could feel familiar. The words of the Psalms were as poetic as they were religious, and he was a star—(a dramatic character, because) before David could fulfill the prophecy and become the king of Israel, he had to take quite a beating. He was forced into exile and ended up in a cave in some no-name border town facing the collapse of his ego and abandonment by God. But this is where the soap opera got interesting. This is where David was said to have composed his first Psalm—a blues. That's what a lot of the Psalms feel like to me—the blues. Man shouting at God—"My God, my God, why has Thou forsaken me? Why art thou so far from helping me?" (Psalm 22).

“I hear echoes of this holy row when unholy blues man Robert Johnson howls, "There's a hellhound on my trail," or Van Morrison sings "sometimes I feel like a motherless child." Texas Alexander mimics the Psalms in "Justice Blues": "I cried Lord my father, Lord thy kingdom come. Send me back my woman, then thy will be done." Humorous, sometimes blasphemous, the blues was backslidin' music; but, by its very opposition, it flattered the subject of its perfect cousin, gospel.”

“Abandonment, displacement is the stuff of my favorite Psalms. The Psalter may be a font of gospel music, but for me it's his despair that the psalmist really reveals and the nature of his special relationship with God. Honesty, even to the point of anger: "How long, Lord? Wilt thou hide thyself forever?" (Psalm 89) or "Answer me when I call" (Psalm 5).”

“Psalms and hymns were my first taste of inspirational music. I liked the words, but I wasn't sure about the tunes—with the exception of Psalm 23, "The Lord is my Shepherd." I remember them as droned and chanted rather than sung. Still, in an odd way, they prepared me for the honesty of John Lennon, the baroque language of Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen, the open throat of Al Green and Stevie Wonder. When I hear these singers, I am reconnected to a part of me I have no explanation for—my "soul," I guess. Years ago, lost for words and 40 minutes of recording time left before the end of our studio time, we were still looking for a song to close our third album, WAR. We wanted to put something explicitly spiritual on the record to balance the politics and the romance of it, like Bob Marley or Marvin Gaye would. We thought about the Psalms—Psalm 40. . . . Psalm 40 is interesting in that it suggests a time in which grace will replace karma, and love will replace the very strict laws of Moses (in other words, fulfill them). I love that thought. David, who committed some of the most selfish, as well as selfless, acts, was depending on it. That the Scriptures are brim full of hustlers, murderers, cowards, adulterers and mercenaries used to shock me; now it is a source of great comfort.” **Here ends the reading.**

How many of you remember disc jockey Casey Kasem and America's Top 40 Countdown? Back in the day when AM radio was king, Kasem would play the tunes from the current week's Billboard Top 40 while interspersing odd tidbits and trivia about the music industry and singers. Well, get ready for one of those Casey Kasem moments. But first . . . welcome to our eleventh annual Blues Service. Once a year we bring the Blues out of the barroom, the bawdyhouse, the juke joint, and the speakeasy—their usual nighttime venue, and bring them into the bright light of day and the church house. The Blues are a musical genre that deals frankly with the shadow side, the night side of life—cheating, fighting, drinking, and gambling. The Blues use words and images that are more often than not crude, violent, and frankly, sexual. In fact, the Blues would seem to extol rather than condemn the shadow side of life.

For these reasons, the Blues are not typically the kind of music you encounter in church on Sunday morning. In the African-American community, Blues are known as the "Devil's own music." So why do we have an annual Blues Sunday? Is it our way of thumbing our noses at other churches? Our way of saying, "Look how outrageous we can be?" Or is it our way of expanding the horizons of religion, of seeking and discovering the holy, the sacred, God, if you will, in the most unexpected places and forms? Is it our way of opening ourselves up to insights and wisdom from every source?

If Blues Sunday is outrageous, it is no more outrageous, I suppose, than the idea of Irish pop singer Bono writing the introduction to a new edition of the Psalms from the Hebrew Scriptures, or of the band U2 ending their concerts with their version of Psalm 40 and calling it the Blues. Bono and the Bible; down and dirty Blues in church on a Sunday morning, God and the Devil, all mixed up, all of our stereotypes confused, our customary categories muddled, and our expectations turned upside down. Isn't that what religion is supposed to be about? Encouraging us to question our assumptions and stereotypes, and letting the truth emerge where it will? Getting past the clichés and the tired old dogmas? Letting God out of those tight little boxes in which we have tried to confine Him? Setting the spirit free, setting us free? I think it is.

My objective on Blues Sunday is not to shock you or to profane the church, but rather my objective is to reveal the sacred, to disclose the holy as it is made manifest in and through the Blues. It is my belief that the holy, the sacred, the divine by what ever name you wish to call it, is not limited to a house of worship, or an hour on Sunday morning. When we try to contain, control, or limit those places and times of when and where sacred wisdom can be found, we only end up displaying our own arrogance. Who says that God only makes an appearance in church on Sunday morning? Who are we to determine where the Holy Spirit can, or will, be made manifest? Blues Sunday reminds us that the Holy Spirit bloweth where it listeth and does not require our permission to go where it will. That Spirit can and will grab hold of you in the most unexpected times, places, and ways. Worship means worth shape, and when and wherever we give shape to our pain, our longings, our frustrations, and even our human dignity, we worship—we give shape to what we value.

My objective this particular morning is to make a case for the fact that the Blues did not just begin on the Mississippi Delta in the Jim Crow years. The Blues are much older than this, their legacy is long and complex. The Blues have a capacity to speak a holy truth across time, space, race, religion, language, and culture. The Blues are universal, but it will always take on the style of a particular place and time. The Blues are, I dare say, a form of sacred music, although seldom recognized as such. And for those who will listen with an open mind and heart, the Blues have the power to disclose something important, yet transcendent, about the nature of human nature, and our capacity for resilience.

Now for that Casey Kasem America's Top 40 Moment! Did you know that one of the most popular Blues songs ever written and performed was "You Ain't Nothing But A Hound Dog"? It is familiar to most of us who remember it as a hit for Elvis Presley in the 1960s, but it was first recorded in 1953 by Blues singer Willie Mae "Big Mama" Thornton. Now, that in and of itself was not unusual. It was not uncommon back then for the songs recorded by African American performers in the 30s, 40s, and 50s to be reissued by white artists making them more acceptable to white audiences. Even a Blues song like "Hound Dog," a lyric that is obviously written from the perspective of a woman complaining about her no good, lying, cheating, shiftless man, the hound dog in question, could be readdressed and made more popular by a white, male performer.

Overt racism and racial exploitation was a tragic dimension of the recording industry. Countless black writers and performers were cheated out of the fame and the royalties they deserved, while white performers and record company owners grew rich. Rock 'n' roll was considered to be a sanitized version of rhythm and blues—also known back then as race music. So it is no surprise that Elvis Presley, a hillbilly singer from Tupelo, Mississippi, went to Memphis and took a song first recorded as a Blues number by a black woman, Big Mama Thornton, and turned it into rock 'n' roll standard, making it popular with white teenagers. Elvis even sang "Hound Dog" on the Ed Sullivan Show while serenading a basset hound, if that is not irony enough!

But who wrote this quintessential Blues song "You Ain't Nothing But a Hound Dog"? Did Big Mama write it herself or was it written by one of those unnamed, uncredited blues performers who had their rights stolen by unscrupulous music industry executives? Or was "Hound Dog" just another old Blues song of unknown origin that came out of the Mississippi Delta and made its way up the river to Memphis and St. Louis? "You Ain't Nothing But A Hound Dog" was written for Big Mama Thornton by Mike Lieber and Jerry Stoller, two nice Jewish boys from the northeast who had never set foot in the Mississippi Delta, much less lived in a share cropper's shack, or chopped cotton, or drank homemade whiskey, or hopped a freight train going north. Lieber and Stoller were 20 years old when they wrote "Hound Dog." So what could two, young, nice, middle-class, white Jewish boys from the northeast know about having the Blues? Good question!

Blues, the name is short for The Blue Devils, and The Blue Devils ain't nothing but a good man, or a good woman, feeling down, or as Blues man Robert Johnson said, "When you've got the blues you got a low down aching in your heart that's killing you by degrees." As a musical form, here in America, the Blues were born the day the West African shoreline fell from the horizon; it was raised in the slavery of the plantations of the Mississippi Delta and flourished in the Southside clubs and tenements of Chicago and New York. The Blues is about loneliness, fear, frustration, unrequited love, despair, and rage, but strangely enough, the Blues is also the way out of loneliness, frustration, despair, and rage. Blues are also about human dignity, about claiming your right as a human being to protest, your right to sing the Blues—your God given right to assert your humanity and claim standing before God and man.

Here is the ultimate irony of the Blues, you sing about hard times, sad times, unrequited love, injustice, and even suffering, because singing the Blues is a cure for the Blues. You sing, you put your feelings into words and music, and you feel better, stronger, empowered! Singing the Blues is a way of reclaiming your dignity, your personhood, your ‘Somebodiness’.

We think of Blues as a genre of music that was born in the Mississippi Delta in the Jim Crow years between the Emancipation Proclamation and the Modern Civil Rights Movement. Blues in America evolved from a mixture of slave songs, work songs, and levee camp hollers, and

was designed to be played on homemade instruments in honky-tonks, bawdyhouses, speakeasies and juke joints. Blues came up the Mississippi from New Orleans, Natchez, Memphis, and St. Louis and they spread out to Kansas City, Chicago, and Detroit where they developed a more urban sound. Blues lyrics are earthy, frank, ribald, often crudely sexual. Blues are a raw and fearless portrayal of both suffering and defiance. They are a form of social protest, a means of resistance, a manifesto, and a refusal to lie down and simply accept your lot in life. They are political as well as personal.

So what do a couple of nice Jewish boys know about the Blues? Maybe Jerry Lieber and Mike Stoller were drawn to the Blues because they unconsciously recognized that the Blues are what the cantor was singing in the synagogue on the high holy days, on Rosh Hashanah and on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. They heard the Blues in the Kol Nidre and the Shema. They knew well those ancient songs of lamentation—the songs of King David—the original Blues Man. Maybe they remembered the words of the Passover Seder recalling another story of slavery and liberation. They might have remembered that after the Hebrew children crossed the Red Sea, Miriam, the sister of Moses, grabbed a tambourine and danced for all she was worth—danced the way only those who have known slavery can dance when they experience liberation. Maybe the African-American musical genre known as the Blues was the best way Lieber and Stoller had of expressing their Jewishness in the 1950s, less than a decade after the horrors of the Holocaust.

So what does a hillbilly singer from Tupelo, Mississippi, or an Irish pop star know about the Blues? My point being, the Blues are not confined to one place, or one race, or one style of music. They are a universal factor of human existence. They are African-American, Appalachian, Jewish, and even Irish. They may sound a little different as they pass through each culture, but you know them when you hear them, or rather when you feel them, or when you feel the emotional release that comes from hearing them. As singer Bono points out, the first Blues were the Psalms and many of the Psalms found in the Hebrew Scriptures were songs of holy protest. "My God, my God, why hath thou forsaken me?"

In his introduction to the Psalms, Bono writes about what it was like for him to grow up in Ireland during the Troubles—the years of sectarian violence in the 1970s. He was the son of a Protestant mother and a Catholic father, and he took the religious discord all around him in a very personal way. As a teenager, Bono came to see religion as the problem, the source of the violence, and so he rejected it. He wanted to have nothing to do with church, with organized religion. But the Bible continued to speak to him, and even as he was rejecting religion, or what he thought of as religion, he was also discovering something holy, even in rock 'n' roll.

Bono recalls: "I began to see religion as the perversion of faith. But I began to see God everywhere else. In girls, fun, music, justice, and still—despite the lofty King James translation—in the Scriptures. Words and music did for me what solid, even rigorous, religious argument could never do—they introduced me to God, not belief in God, more an experiential sense of GOD. Over art, literature, girls, my mates, the way into my spirit was a combination of words and music. As a result, the Book of Psalms always felt open to me and led me to the poetry of Ecclesiastes, the Song of Solomon, the book of John. . . . My religion could not be fiction, but it had to transcend facts. It could be mystical, but not mythical."

"King David was a star, the Elvis of the Bible, if we can believe the chiseling of Michelangelo. And unusual for such a "rock star," with his lust for power, lust for women, lust for life, he had the humility of one who knew his gift worked harder than he ever would. He even danced naked in front of his troops… David was definitely more performance artist than politician."

"Anyway, I stopped going to churches and got into a different kind of religion. Don't laugh. That's what being in a rock 'n' roll band is. Showbiz is shamanism, music is worship. Whether it's worship of women, or their designer, the world, or its destroyer, whether it comes from that ancient place we call soul or simply the spinal cortex, whether the prayers are on fire with a dumb rage or dove-like desire, the smoke goes upwards, to God, or something you replace God with—usually yourself."

Maybe Bono is right. The Psalms were the original form of the Blues. King David was the first rock star. And rock 'n' roll, rhythm and blues, are not anti-religion, the Devil's music, as many have said, but a way back to God for those who have given up on church. What we have come to know as the Blues are a uniquely African-American version of something very ancient, very primal. That something speaks to all who cry out against the world's unfairness and injustice. It speaks through all who wail, who moan, who protest, who assert their 'somebodiness' against the world's indifference. It is the music of those who refuse to be crushed by life; those who are willing to go down fighting, or singing. The holy is where you find it, or where it finds you, and captures your spirit—that may be in church, or in a honky-tonk bar. You can't create it, you can't make it happen, but you can be open to it. But whether you are African-American, Jewish, Irish, or a hillbilly, or whether you respond to the words of an ancient Hebrew King, or a modern day Blues Man, that song of holy protest is the same. It echoes across the barriers of time and space, race and gender, and speaks a raw truth to those who will listen. It is a cry of resistance; a hymn of protest. It sings, I am Somebody. I am Somebody who bears the image and likeness of my creator. I am a child of God. And I have a right to sing the Blues. **Amen.**

Blues Prayer

God, Creative Spirit, Source of Inspiration, Giver of Song, for Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms we give thanks. For Folk songs, work songs, Broadway tunes, operas, hymns and lullabies we give thanks. For the rich musical heritage of Africans and African-Americans, we give thanks; for Soul Music, Jazz, and Ragtime, for Klezmer, Reggae, Polkas, Spirituals, Rhythm and Blues, Gregorian Chants, and Gospel, we offer praise. For all of the music of Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas, we are grateful. For all the ways in which men and women have turned their deepest feelings into verse and melody, we say thank you. For drums, brass, strings, and pipes, we rejoice. For voices lifted together in both praise and pain, we give thanks. For the joy and sorrow, hope and fear that have come to us through the songs of all people, we give thanks. For songs of ecstasy, songs of suffering, songs of love, songs of lamentation, for the songs we grew up with, and the ones our mothers sang to us . . . for all of the memories that particular songs evoke, the tunes that make us smile, and the ones that bring us to tears, we are grateful. For we recognize that our human need to sing, to play, to compose, to listen, to turn our experiences of life into music are unique expressions of individuality as well as universal expressions of our common humanity. In music we transcend time and space, race, culture, language, and longing. For in music there is no high culture, or low culture, only the sounds of the human heart expressing its deepest longings, going to the places where words alone are not enough. For the gift of music, and for musicians, for those gifted with talent, and for those who take pleasure in the talents of others, and for ears to hear, for hands to clap, we rejoice, we give thanks, we celebrate.

O, Holy One, Sacred Spirit that moves in and through music, hear our prayers, hear our songs, sing in us, make us into your instruments!