



[Read Psalm 142 from The Message]

What you've just heard are the lyrics of a song...a song that gives voice to the pain and hardship of life. We no longer have the tune that it was sung to, but if you sit with the words for a while you can feel the anguish of the one who wrote the song. It was written and sung by a man whose friends had deserted him, whose loyalty had been betrayed, and whose life was in serious danger. There is a thread of despair that runs throughout the song. But there is also thread of hope.

History tells us that the Blues...as a form of music... was born in the North Mississippi Delta slave culture of the mid-1800's. But the blues...as a state of being...have been with us for as long as human beings have been alive. Heartache and despair are all part of life, and they seem to demand a place to go...they need a voice. And music has been one of the most natural vehicles for their expression. Thousands of years ago the Psalms were exactly that expression for the ancient Israelites, and 150 years ago the Blues were that expression for African-American slaves.

The Blues have their origins in something called "Field Hollers". This was both a way for workers in the cotton and rice fields to communicate with one another, and a way to numb the pain of slavery. The senior field hand would start the song by singing a line and the rest of the field workers would answer. Back and forth the dialogue went, usually expressing the hardship of their lives. It was this very call and response format that birthed the blues in which the singer sings a line and then an instrument would respond.

Musicians debate what, exactly, makes the blues the blues. But almost all agree that at the heart of it are two things. First, there's the blues scale. Listen to this. Here's a major scale [play one]. Now here's a blues scale [play one]. There's

something about the subtle difference in that blues scale that just reaches in and grabs your heart. Listen to just a piece of a blues tune [play something from the blues]. Isn't it amazing how music can make us feel?

And the second thing that makes the blues the blues are the lyrics. They are saturated with themes of the brokenness of life...of love found and love lost or betrayed, of hope and despair. They are an unvarnished version of the reality of human life...especially its sorrows.

Let me give you an example. Here are some of the lyrics from the classic blues song "Blues in the Night" made famous by Ella Fitzgerald: "My mamma done told me when I was in pigtails; my mamma done told me, 'Hon, a man's gonna sweet talk, and give you a big eye, but when that sweet talkin's done a man is a two-faced, a worrisome thing who'll leave ya to sing the blues in the night.'" Better yet, let's listen to a piece of that classic blues tune [have someone sing a bit if we can]

That's classic blues. And that's life. The blues don't pretty up the reality of life. Instead it names the pain and invites us to walk through it.

And perhaps that's why the blues are so popular as a musical form. Life is filled with disappointment, heartache and hardship. Far too often our culture just encourages us to medicate our pain, run away from it or ignore it. But the blues are honest about life. They invite us into the pain. The problem is...the blues give us no answer to our pain. They describe the hard side of life, but they offer no hope.

And that's where the songs of faith differ from the blues. While Psalm 142 does not pretty up the pain of the one who sang it, it is filled with hope because the singer's pain has a place to go...it goes to the heart of God. "I cry out loudly to GOD," he says, "loudly I plead with GOD for mercy. I spill out all my complaints before him, and spell out my troubles in detail: As I sink in despair, my spirit ebbing away, you know how I'm feeling..." He gives his pain to God, trusting that God knows how he feels. But then listen for the hope, "You're my last chance, my only hope for life...rescue me."

Ever feel like that...sinking in despair, your spirit ebbing away? We all have. That's part of life. That's the blues. But it is because of those very moments and into those very moments that God breaks in with hope. It's the hope we

just got done celebrating on Christmas morning...Jesus, the hope of the world.

The blues sing about failure, but Jesus came to forgive you.

The blues sing about the broken past, but Jesus came to give you a new future.

The blues sing about the pain of love lost, but Jesus came to love you forever.

The blues sing about loneliness, but Jesus promises to be with you always.

The blues sing about bondage, but Jesus came to set you free.

The blues say it's all over, but Jesus says it has just begun.

The blues point to the problem, but Jesus is the answer.

Soon, we begin a whole new year. Like a blank score it opens before us, waiting for the notes that life will write upon it. And while some of the songs on that score will be songs of joy, others are bound to be the blues. That's just the way life is in this broken world. Jesus himself said, "In this world you will have troubles." But then he said, "Take heart, I have overcome the world."

And that's the tension that we find in both the Psalms and the Blues. Both invite us to acknowledge, name the pain of life. Both give us permission to cry out and even rail at God, trusting that even when we do God hears us and loves us and holds us.

But both the Psalms and the Blues also invite us to embrace the hope that God is in it all, moving us and all of creation to restoration and wholeness. As we pour out our pain to God, God fills us peace and the healing begins. That's the tension we live in as Christians.

And that's why we invited you to take a rubber band when you walked into worship today. It's meant to serve as a reminder of the tension we live in – giving voice to our pain, and claiming the hope that is ours in Christ.

So, whatever songs you sing in this New Year, know this: there is hope, healing, forgiveness and love in Jesus. So, sing every song in this New Year with faith. Let's pray together and commit this New Year to Jesus, our hope.....