

The Divine Hours of Prayer and the Blues

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Over the years, the Divine Hours of Prayers have often evolved into hours for the Blues for me as a result of choosing to spend significant time during these periods of time reflecting on my own personal plights and those within the communities in which I live, work, worship, socialize, and serve. I first learned to practice the Divine Hours of Prayers collectively in Christian monasteries during day visits and retreats. Monasteries have set hours of divine prayer that follow the traditional times of prayer or canonical hours that have been established over the centuries based on the practice of "Seven times a day I praise you," which is found in the Psalms (119.164). They include the hours of four watches or vigils—6 to 9 p.m.; 9 p.m. to Midnight; Midnight to 3 a.m.; and 3 to 6 a.m. and are known as Vespers, Compline, Vigils, and Matins. These prayers also include the following designated times between sunrise and sunset—9 a.m.; noon, and 3 p.m. and are known as Prime, Sext, and None.

I began to practice the Divine Hours of Prayers individually, outside of the monasteries and particularly at home. The hour of prayer that I kept most often was around midnight since I was a "late-owl" who would rather stay up late at night than get up really early in the morning. I soon termed this time as the "Divine Hour of the Midnight Blues." I often found myself spending long periods of reflection in the midst of my midnight hour of prayer and blues that centered on personal issues with relationships and career development and social issues such as poverty and unemployment. Such times were constantly filled with feelings of angst, grieve, and other similar feelings.

I often reminded myself about the Blues, a genre of music filled with expressive lyrics and emotions that over the decades permeated the bars and clubs of cities like Chicago, where I grew up. Not only did the lyrics of these songs strike a spiritual chord, the titles of some of the songs did as well. Such titles included the "Midnight Blues," "the Three O' Clock Blues," and the "Six O' Clock Blues" which were comparable to the times for the Divine Hours of Prayer.

The hours for the Blues have a history that goes back a couple of hundred years. Originating among African Americans living in the Southern states of the U.S., the Blues have been described as "the essence of the African American laborer, whose spirit is wed to these songs, reflecting his (or her) inner soul to all who will listen."¹ The lyrics are often filled with chants of sorrow, a lost love, the harsh realities of life, yearnings to be free from life's troubles, and the on-going journey of the misery of a lost soul longing for redemption. I heard such lyrics throughout the years by listening to the songs sung by some of the great Blues men like B.B. King and Muddy Waters and some of the great Blues women such as KoKo Taylor and Dinah Washington.

During the last half of the 20th Century, these Blues persons and others such as Howlin' Wolf, John Lee Hooker, and Willie Dixon were discovered by young White American and English musicians such as Bono, Eric Burdon, Janis Joplin, David Clayton-Thomas, Stevie Nicks, and Mick

¹ "A Short Blues History," (<http://history-of-rock.com/blues.htm>).

Jagger. They lead or led such bands as U2, the Animals, Big Brother and the Holding Company, Blood, Sweat, and Tears, Fleetwood Mac, and the Rolling Stones. These bands helped shape a whole generation of listeners concerning the lyrics of the Blues that included people like me who could listen but not string or sing the Blues.

Recently, I spent three days with my spouse on Beale Street, known to many as the “Home of the Blues” and the “heart” of downtown Memphis. There is a three block stretch that is filled with, and surrounded by, clubs, bars, and restaurants that are filled with Blues bands whose music not only fills the spaces in which they perform but the immediate surrounding streets as well. These night spots reminded me of the many places that I frequented while living for years in Chicago.

Walking distance from this stretch of Beale Street is the National Civil Rights Museum, which is the site of the Lorraine Motel where Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in 1968. Through several past and on-going exhibits, collections, and research programs, the museum recounts the civil rights movement including the sayings, chants, and songs that supported the struggle. The museum is laid out in such a way that at the very end you wind up at the very room (#306) where King stayed right before he was shot. You can look out the front window and see the very spot he lay dying. You can also look across the street and see the building, and even the still slightly opened window, from where he was shot. This building has also been converted into part of the museum and contains several related exhibits and collections.

Also, along Beale Street is the Museum of Rock and Soul which is made up of several galleries that are filled with exhibits that tell the story of the birth of rock and soul music. Exhibits focus on the various types of music and specific musical pioneers who helped overcome racial and socio-economic barriers that helped usher in the civil rights movement. Types of music include the rural field hollers, porch music of sharecroppers, work songs of laborers, ballads, spirituals, and chants. Musicians include predominately Blacks and Whites, and some Latinos.

Reflecting on these experiences in Memphis has reminded me once again of the many times over the years that I made parallels between the emotional expressions found within the scriptures, that have been devoutly dedicated for use for the Divine Hours of Prayer, and the emotional expressions found within the lyrics of Blues songs. Another parallel that I made is the times of the day that have been faithfully marked and encouraged by these distinct but spiritually related practices.

By emotional expressions I mean cries that expressed hurts, wounds, demands, grievances, and injustices among other similar feelings that filled the lyrics of many Blues songs that were bellowed by the Blues men and Blues women. Similar feelings can also be found in many verses of the Book of Psalms, which has been the one book of the Bible that has been used more often during the Divine Hours of Prayer than any other. These Psalms, filled with passionate verses, were sung and chanted over the centuries as they are today according to ancient and modern day scholars.

Designated times of the day were also a hallmark of both of these spiritual experiences. Certain times of a day were highlighted by the writers of the 150 psalms and the composers of Blues songs. These were times to be personal and passionate as expressed by J. B. Lenoir in the "Passionate Blues" and also times to be wailing and moaning which was voiced by Howlin Wolf when he sang songs like "Moanin the Blues." These have been the experiences of B.B. King, who is also known as the King of the Blues, and of King David whose Psalms are imagined by Bono to be the origins of the Blues (see "Bono, The Bible, and the Blues" at <http://thornscompose.com/2010/03/02/bono-on-the-psalms>).

As did the Divine Hours of Prayers, the hours for the Blues have evolved over time. Blues men and Blues women have thundered the emotionally filled lyrics of songs that became Blues standards, such as the "Three O'Clock Blues," which was first recorded by the West Coast Blues man Lowell Fulson more than 60 years ago. This lamentation-filled melody helped launch the career of the famed Blues guitarist, vocalist, and songwriter B.B. King. He grew up singing in the gospel choir at Elkhorn Baptist Church in Kilmichael, Mississippi, where he was raised by his maternal grandmother after his father abandoned the family and his mother married another man.

The aforementioned song also enhanced the musical career of the great versatile guitarist Eric Clapton, who strung his guitar while B.B. roared the "Three O'Clock Blues" lyrics when they performed together.

The "Six O'Clock Blues" was another lamentation or howling type song that was popularized by the contemporary rhythm of Blues man Lucky Peterson and others. Peterson intones it in the tradition of Blues men like B.B. King, while Solange Knowles, younger sister of Beyoncé, sings it to a more contemporary beat. Buddy Guy, an early pioneer of the Chicago Blues, has sung a "Six O'Clock Blues" with different lyrics than the one noted above.

It seems that as a day wore on, so did the Blues. Various evening and night time hours were designated times for the Blues. Songs were entitled "Early Evening Blues," "In the Evening Blues," and "Late in the Evening Blues." The Blues man John Lee Hooker and others sang the "Wednesday Evening Blues," while the Blues woman Ella Fitzgerald sang "Blues in the Night," and another Blues woman "Ma" Rainey sang "Those All Night Long Blues."

The "Nine O'Clock Blues" became more famous as a specific time for various Blues songs to be sung rather than a title for one particular song. The midnight hour also became famous as a designated time for many a Blues songs and a title for a specific Blues song. The renowned guitarist and harmonica player Howlin Wolf sang "Moanin at Midnight" as did others including Janis Joplin. A reminder that the Blues continued to sunrise was sung by John Lee Hooker and others with songs such as "Blues before Sunrise."

"Early in the Morning" was a Blues song sung by Sonny Boy Williamson that became another Blues standard, and "Early Morning Blues" was sung by the Blues man Blind Blake. We were recently reminded that the Blues can continue throughout the day in a song entitled "High Noon

Blues” by Night Beats, a recently formed band that incorporates the sounds and lyrics of Rhythm and Blues into their songs.

The psalms are often chanted during the Divine Hours of Prayer. They have traditionally been the centering prayers for partakers of this ancient spiritual tradition. Having read and prayed the Psalms so often throughout the years, I became very familiar with the many emotional petitions contained within them. Also, after so many years, I become accustomed to those emotional petitions that express a heightened intense supplication towards God. One such intense emotional expression, likely sung with an equal amount of intensity, can be found in Psalm 13:

“Lord, how long must I wait? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you turn your face away from me?
How long must I struggle with my thoughts?
How long must my heart be sad day after day?”
(vv.1-2)

Another is expressed in Psalm 22:

“My God, my God, why have you deserted me?
Why do you seem to be so far away when I need you to save me?
Why do you seem to be so far away that you can't hear my groans?
My God, I cry out in the daytime. But you don't answer.
I cry out at night. I can't keep quiet.”
(vv.1-2)

It was during my Midnight Divine Hour of Prayer that I became intensely aware of most of the emotional expressions found within several of the Psalms and other books of the Bible and within the lyrics of Blues songs. During this time of prayer, I became increasingly comfortable with engaging God with deep emotions that stemmed from these verses and lyrics.

There were times that I tried to hold back anger, frustration, and tears over worries concerning personal relationships and seemingly insurmountable social problems such as poverty. I would turn to some of the verses of the Psalms out of a need to substantiate my actions and reactions and would write, read, and/or repeat them such as “I am worn out from groaning; all night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears (Psalm 6.6). The haunting lyrics of “Cry Me a River,” which would become even more melancholic through the expressive and sultry voice of Ella Fitzgerald, resonated during these emotional times as well.

The initial words to the song are

“Now you say you're lonely
You cried the long night through
Well, you can cry me a river, cry me a river
cried a river over you.”

For comfort, I often wrote and repeated by memory "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning (Psalm 30.5)."

B.B. King stated that "the Blues is an expression of anger against shame and humiliation" and the Psalms and Blues songs are filled with both. I am reminded of the Depression-era hit "Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out" which was made famous by Bessie Smith who was known as the Empress of the Blues. That sense of feeling of being abandoned by others is underlined in this song which notes

"In your pocket, not one penny;
And as for friends, you don't have any."

and the song ends with

"Nobody knows you,
Nobody knows you,
Nobody knows you when you're down and out.

The Psalmist often felt abandoned after feeling guilty for doing things unbecoming of a godly person and after losing the support of others. Psalm 13 is one of a few Psalms that I have personally entitled "The Psalms of the Blues." The Psalm begins with a heightened sense of abandonment that is intensified by others triumphing over the Psalmist.

How long, Lord? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and day after day have sorrow in my heart?
How long will my enemy triumph over me?
(vv. 1-2)

Another one of my "Psalms of the Blues" is Psalm 22 which includes the following verses:

'My God, I cry out in the daytime.
But you don't answer.
I cry out at night. I can't keep quiet.'" (v.2)

"People treat me like a worm and not a man.
They hate me and look down on me." (v. 6)

People treating someone like a worm and not a man (or women or child) is an injustice and cries for justice appear among the emotional expressions within the Psalms and the lyrics of the Blues.

My own cries for justice occurred more and more often during my Divine Hours of the Midnight Blues and other prayer and Blues times. As a result, these hours of prayer evolved into times that

consisted of lots of reflection and emotional prayer. This happened because my own personal life concerning relationships, educational pursuits, and career became more and more complex. Equally complex, if not more so, were my increasing experiences of community involvement with social issues. Such involvement included support for affordable housing, ending homelessness, small business and job development, substance abuse treatment, mental health care, and ending discriminatory practices such as redlining, steering, and implementation of prejudicial zoning ordinances that resulted in discrimination of people's civil rights.

Homelessness in particular became extremely disturbing. During the past few decades the streets have become filled with thousands and thousands of homeless persons. Also, during this same time, hundreds of thousands of persons have been living at risk of homelessness. Just this morning a headline to a story in the Washington Post read "United States poverty on track to rise to highest since 1960s" and the story opened up with

"The ranks of America's poor are on track to climb to levels unseen in nearly half a century, erasing gains from the war on poverty in the 1960s amid a weak economy and fraying government safety net. Census figures will be released . . ."

If I could string and sing the Blues, the first such song I would compose would be entitled "A Homeless Person Engraved in the Psalms" and many of the words would come right out of Psalm 31 which is as follows:

"Be merciful to me, Lord, for I am in distress;
my eyes grow weak with sorrow,
my soul and body with grief.
My life is consumed by anguish
and my years by groaning;
my strength fails because of my affliction,
and my bones grow weak.
Because of all my enemies,
I am the utter contempt of my neighbors
and an object of dread to my closest friends—
those who see me on the street flee from me.
I am forgotten as though I were dead;
I have become like broken pottery."
(vv 10-12)

There were Blues men and Blues women who could string and sing the Blues about homelessness. One of them was the prolific writer and singer Josh White, who was known to be one of the closest African American confidants to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Many of his songs were known as social protest songs and included the "Homeless and Hungry Blues" which included the following words:

"It's getting cold and colder I ain't got nowhere to go

cold and colder I ain't got nowhere to go
asked my friend to help me
Thrown me out and slammed the door.
I'm broke and disgusted and want nobody to lend me a helping hand
I'm broke and disgusted please give me a helping hand
I'm cold and hungry what is more than I can bear."

Another was the pianist and vocalist Willie "Long Time" Smith who sang the "Homeless Blues," which opened with the following lyrics:

"On one cold and rocky morning
The ground was filled up with cold
On one cold and rocky morning
The ground was filled up with cold
Well I met enough people
who did not have no place to go.
Well some had children
Some just had things to keep them goin.
You know these people were walkin but could find no place to go."

Other cries for justice among the Blues songs include "Cities Need Help" which included the following lyrics sung by Buddy Guy

"We need help in our city, people,
we need a lot of help in our town
We need a lot of help in our city,
you know, we need a lot of help in our town
'Cause a lot of lil' innocent children, Lord knows,
they're being gunned down

We need help in our schools,
we need a lot of help in our home
We need a lot of help in our schools,
we need a lot of help in our home
'Cause, Lord knows, somewhere, somehow,
oh, somethings going all wrong."

Stringing and singing the Blues outwardly within a spiritual service may not be so far off. A growing number of Roman Catholic, Anglican, and other mainstream Protestant congregations integrate Jazz music into the prayers and hymns of Vespers on Sundays during the late afternoon or early evening. This has become known as "Jazz Vespers." Incorporating the Blues into the formal practice of the Divine Hours of Prayers such as Vespers would be unique and perhaps increasingly imaginable in the near future. A quick online search revealed that the Second Baptist

Church in St. Louis sponsors a monthly “Jazz and Blues Vespers” and a “Blues Vespers” was noted as a once a month service at Immanuel Presbyterian Church in Tacoma, Washington.

Perhaps a “Blues Vespers” will be a once a month service sponsored by a mounting number of congregations where Blues music is integrated into prayers and hymns. Perhaps Blues music will increasingly accompany some of the Blues-like scriptures that appear throughout the Psalms and other books of the bible. When fitting, perhaps some of the appropriate lyrics of the Blues songs accompanied by its music will also be integrated into evening services such as Vespers and other times of prayer. Stringing and singing the Blues collectively, may move congregation members to further their efforts to bring healing to others outside their doors who have been hurt as a result of wounding social issues. Such wounds may also need healing for some within their doors. This would help many members reach new depths in their relationship with God.

Imagining yourself stringing and singing the Blues inwardly can be very healing as well. Integrating the Blues while observing the Divine Hours of Prayer at home alone can be both personally intentional and natural, particularly if you allow significant time for reflection concerning personal matters and social issues. While praying the Psalms you are likely to become reflective because the Psalms are filled with reflective scriptures. Incorporating the lyrics of the Blues will probably make you even more reflective. Many verses in the Psalms focus on injustice, poverty, anger, and grief as Blues lyrics do. Thus, you will also likely feel discouraged at times and may feel melancholic. Bouts of frustration will probably increase and even anger may come about.

However, faithfulness, comfort, and healing are also the focus of many of the verses of the Psalms which helped strengthened me throughout these spiritual experiences. As a result, I found myself willing to embrace any bouts with the blues during my hours of prayer. I am convinced that embracing the Blues, as both feelings and lyrics during a personal or collective Divine Hour of Prayer, will ultimately help you reach new depths in your relationship with God that can help you change troubling personal matters from sorrow to joy and wounding societal issues from injustices to justices. I can certainly attest to this.