

A NEW SONG

Psalm 96:1-6

May 22, 2022

Long before faith is spoken, it is sung.

That's right. There is a growing consensus among neuroscientists and anthropologists that language itself originated from song, that music taps into the pre-cognitive archaic part of the human mind. While I can appreciate the contributions of science and scholarship to such a finding, having spent time with many infants and toddlers myself, I'd suggest to you that this is *not* breaking news. Before we speak, we sing.

Music transcends the limits of language. Of course, people of faith have always known this. In his letter to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul offers some worship instructions to this brand-new community of faith. They were just beginning to gather in worship, and the apostle writes, "Be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms, hymns and spirituals among yourselves. Sing and make melody to the Lord in your hearts." *Be filled with the Spirit as you sing.* You see, Paul takes it for granted that God's Spirit will fill us as we sing. And Paul is right about that. Just consider for a moment your most moving experiences of God's presence—those moments in your life that you can easily call to mind or heart, where the presence of the divine was palpable and unmistakable for you. And then ask yourself: How many of them are set to sacred soundtrack?

Twenty-two years ago this month, I sat in the sanctuary of Vandalia Presbyterian Church in Greensboro, North Carolina, two weeks before my high school graduation. Well, I say I sat in the sanctuary, and that's technically true. At the very back of the sanctuary. Nearest the door that would be my exit. As soon as the closing hymn began, the

congregation stood, and my preacher father was no longer paying attention to whether or not I was in the room—I had a plan. My mind was not with my body in worship. I was preoccupied and distracted, my mind cast forward to two weeks later when I would finally be free from all of this. I was the definition of an inattentive parishioner. My mind was anywhere but worship. But when we stood to sing the closing hymn, my feet stayed glued to the floor. "Here I am, Lord." We sang the words of the refrain to that hymn. "I will go, Lord, if you lead me." The people singing that song all around me had formed my faith. They had loved me into faith, and they had blessed me and sent me where I was now going. The song became a prayer that struck me to the core. And to this day, I cannot sing that hymn without returning in my mind and heart to that moment. Two weeks ago, we gathered here in the sanctuary and celebrated the faith and recognized the confirmation of thirty-eight ninth graders. And as we stood to sing that hymn, my mind returned twenty-two years back to that moment. Before faith is spoken, it is sung.

Fifteen years later, I sat in another sanctuary on a hot, summer evening—this one in Overland Park, Kansas—and listened as a group of teenagers from the congregation I served in Atlanta lifted their voices to proclaim a truth we all desperately needed to hear. They sang a text that was written by Mark Miller. The words are these: "No matter what the church says—decisions, pronouncements on you—you are a child, a child of God. And there is no thing, and no one, who can separate you from this truth." The words are powerful, but it was hearing them sung, with conviction, by this group of teenagers that made the difference that night. I knew those

students. I knew something of their struggles and their successes. I heard the stories of their pain and their promise. And I also knew that some of those singers had been rejected and turned away from other churches because of who they were. And when they sang—I am a child of God—they proclaimed the truth. *No matter what the church says—decisions, pronouncements on you—you are a child of God.* No matter what. I remember how the melody enveloped the room, and tears streamed from the singers' faces. It's a moment I'll never forget.

Before faith is spoken, it is sung. When we teach the faith to our children, we do not attempt to explain the intricacies of our theological positions. We do not ask our children to memorize a list of doctrines. We sing. We teach song. We make melody. Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so. He's got the whole world in his hands. This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine, let it shine, let it shine. We teach the faith through song. Before faith is spoken, it is sung.

Scripture says it was this way from the very beginning. Scripture says that human beings were created to praise God. In fact, from the text from Isaiah we just heard this morning (Isaiah 42:10-12), scripture says that all of creation itself sings praise to God. We were given the gift of music as a sign of God's presence in the world, a source of joy and the unity we find in harmony. The songs that frame our faith are drawn from these deep wells of communal memory, passed down generation to generation. Scripture is saturated with song.

A colleague of mine was recently reflecting on an experience he had while teaching a Bible study at his church. He was in the middle of teaching a text about God as a living and lively agent, the God who intrudes in the world to create new futures. He was in the middle of his sentence when a friend of his, a member of the congregation, a weekly participant in the Bible study, interrupted him. She explained that she could never say words that attribute active agency to God. Why not? Because such a claim

violates the rational limits of her faith. She described how for her, God is more of an idea. And religion, while useful, is a blueprint for ethical humanism. As she spoke, it occurred to the pastor that his friend also sings in the choir.

He wrote, "She sings of angels at Christmas. On Easter morning, she sings of the resurrection from the dead. On Pentecost, she sings of the rush of the Spirit like a mighty wind in the gathering of the disciples. She sings such claims without batting an eye. My friend and all of us: We sing what we cannot say."

We sing what we cannot say. I've been thinking about that claim for several weeks now, reflecting on how—in scripture and in worship—our songs cast a vision forward, beyond the limits of the present moment or human intellect or reason. No matter what the church says...I am a child, a child of God. Here I am, Lord. I will go, Lord, if you lead me.

What I'm describing here are experiences of resonance—those moments, fleeting though they may be, when we are especially attuned to the presence of God in our lives. Music, poetry, silence... They have the effect of slowing down the pace and volume of our words. They slow *us* down. And in an age of soundbites, simulations, and social media—ubiquitous and endless accessibility, availability—we need to slow down. We need to experience the sacred in slow motion. It is a gift of worship that this time invites us to slow down.

This week a member of our community was expressing to me her gratitude for the livestream option on Sunday mornings. I was glad to accept her gratitude until she explained the reason why she was so grateful for the option of worshipping at home. She explained to me, "On Sunday mornings, I can get two loads of laundry done during the worship service. Multi-tasking." But we are *not* in a hurry in this space. Here we are not aiming at productivity, efficiency, or acceleration. Here we march to the beat of a different drum. A heartbeat of the divine. We desperately need these moments of transcendence and resonance. We find them in worship. We find them in song.

Before faith is spoken, it is sung. We sing what we cannot say. The songs of faith connect us to the great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us. Consider for a moment who taught you to sing the songs of faith. Who was it, in your life, who passed on the melodies and memories of divine encounter? Surely some of these saints are still with you. Many have completed the journey of life on earth. But know this: All of them sing beside you. Among my most poignant memories as a pastor are those moments spent at the bedside of one who is dying. Sometimes we can have a conversation or a prayer, but often I simply sit in silence. We hold hands. And then there are those moments when the ability to speak may have passed but the need for song goes on. And so, on more than one occasion, I have witnessed this miracle: Though no words can be spoken, hymns can still be sung. When memory fades, music persists. When strength is gone, melody lingers. We sing what we cannot say. I will never forget sitting beside Anne West, a beloved saint, as her breath slowed, and her eyes closed. I stopped speaking and began singing the words to Amazing Grace. For a moment, Anne's eyes opened, and she smiled. Amazing grace indeed. Oh, the power of music to reach down into our hearts. Surely God knew that we would need these sturdy songs of transcendence.

Surely God knows that we need resonance in an age characterized by a cacophony of chaos and conflict. We need a new song, a song that stirs us from complacency in the face of atrocity after atrocity. We need a new song. We need a song that subverts systems of exploitation and violence. We need a new song. We need a song that anticipates a new day, a different world, a deeper power.

Sing to the Lord a new song. Sing a living, breathing melody that insists that God is up to something in the church and in the world. Sing to the Lord a new song. Sing a new song, a song unafraid of change and open to transformation. Sing to the Lord a new song rooted in ancient memory and the songs of our ancestors and reaching toward the God of the future who is always ahead of us. Sing to the Lord

a new song from the depths of your soul, a new song of mercy and grace, a new song of justice and compassion. Sing to the Lord a new song and watch in wonder as God shows up. Sing to the Lord a new song your soul aches to receive. Sing a song and find courage and hope. This, I think, is the truth that might be the source of our joy and the beginning of our renewal. This is our God-given purpose: to offer our lives in praise.

Now, I do understand that such a declaration might be met with doubt or even cynicism. Commending songs of praise can be a tough sell for folks like you and me. After all, singing doesn't *do* anything. When I finish those two loads of laundry, there are neat piles of folded clothes in front of me, a manifestation of the work I have done. Singing is not action-oriented. Its impact is not measurable; its progress is hard to track. And I get it. Much of the time I am suspicious of praise with no strategic plan for how to put it to productive use. But then I am blessed by the witness of those who see God in even the most ordinary moments, who pitch praise like loaves and fish in a hungry world.

Our five-year-old son Ben is, as of Friday afternoon, a pre-K graduate. He's a budding songwriter and often my best instructor in inefficient practices of praise. So far, most of his musical compositions have the same tune as the lunch prayer he learned here at Children's Circle Preschool. But at dinnertime, Ben adlibs the words, often getting up from his seat and walking around the dining room in search of reasons for praise. Something like this: "Thank you, God. Thank you, God. For our food. And our table. And the window. And my socks. And my Pokemon cards. And my fork. And my art supplies. And my books. And my clothes. And, and, and..." You get the point.

But sometimes it's getting late, and there's still a lot we need to get done. And I'm tempted to cut the kid off.

That's enough praise, son. We're on a schedule here. We've got important things to do, and I think you're stalling bath time.

After all, praise of God has no measurable earthly value, no guaranteed return on investment, no practical effect.

Except. Before faith is spoken, it is sung. When words are gone, melody remains. In the discordant dissonance of an accelerating age, we come to retrieve what we've lost—to sing a new song of dangerous hope and defiant faith.

God is here. God is alive. Lift up your voice. Sing a new song.