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What Song Shall We Sing?

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Psalm 98

Imagine for a moment a choir composed of all the psalmists of the Bible. The 150 Psalms are, after all, the hymnbook of scripture. The ancient Hebrew people sang them in their worship of God, as we sing hymns or anthems today.

Imagine a choir of all those psalmists.

The church once thought many of the psalms were composed by David, son of Jesse, who lived in Bethlehem in days of old. As a shepherd, young David was so well-known for his harp-playing and song that King Saul summoned him to the royal court to make music. The tradition grew over time that David wrote about half the songs that came to be called the Psalms – the Greek word is *psalmoi*, meaning “instrumental music and the words that accompany it.”

Scholars have reached a different conclusion about who wrote the psalms. They assume the Hebrew hymns found in scripture come from many different sources – maybe 150 different composers and poets. Imagine a choir made of all of them – young and old, high voices and low, maybe even David among them. They assemble in a large sanctuary to sing their worship of God, and someone asks, “What song shall we sing?”

That’s the question anyone preparing to worship God starts with. *What song shall we sing? What text shall we read? What word shall we hear?*

A voice in the choir says, “Let’s sing of God’s justice and righteous judgement, you know, the one that goes, ‘Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute.’” (Ps. 82:3)

Another voice in the choir speaks up, “I think we should sing of the peace that comes from God, maybe the one about God leading us beside still waters and restoring our souls.” (Ps. 23: 2-3)

Another says. “Why not sing of God’s power and might, you know, ‘God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.’” (Ps. 46:1)

What song shall we sing?

What about all creation joining in?

“Praise the Lord from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps, fire and hail, snow and frost...mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars! Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds!...Let everything that has breath praise the Lord! (Ps. 148:7-10; 150:6)

Then, from the back of the choir comes a timid voice. “Why not sing of our sorrow, remembering our time in exile, when God seemed far away, when, ‘like a deer that longs for flowing streams our souls longed for God?’” (Ps. 42:1)

“Or,” another singer cries out with an edge to their voice, “When we feel as if God has abandoned us – why not one of those songs:

‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from answering the words of my groaning?’” (Ps. 22:1-2)

What song shall we sing?

That question has always shaped the worship of God and informed the relationship of creature to Creator. Shall we sing of lament or joy, or of our need for comfort and healing, our longing for peace, or of God’s love for the poor or the beauty of creation? Where do we begin? What is on our hearts today?

Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard wrote an essay in the mid-19th century about faith which he titled *Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing*. In it he famously describes *worship as theater*, but we get it wrong if we think those of us leading and singing and preaching are the actors. This is not performance for the congregation, although there's a lot of that passing as worship today. Kierkegaard describes worship as *drama with God as the audience* – and all of us are together, presenting our worship to God.

The starting question, then, is, *what do we want God to hear? What song shall we sing?*

Music has always been at the heart of the worship of God. We can use words – and I often do – but when they are set to music and we sing them we remember them, we pass them on, we teach them to our children. That's why the psalms and songs are some of the oldest literature in scripture – people remember them. When we sing we find our bodies opening to the words by the very act of giving our breath to them.

Music has never been ancillary to the Word of God. Even in the ascetic days of the Protestant Reformation when all art and images were removed from sanctuaries so as not to distract the heart or mind from God, they still sang the psalms.

Yvette Flunder, who spoke here this week as part of the Festival of Homiletics, says,

“Worship leads up to and away from the preached word. And, by the way, that preached word does not always have to be the oration. The preached word can come through a song.”

Music has always conveyed the word of God. The old Hebrew poets knew that, and that’s why they *sang* their words. The melody conveyed the meaning. Our hymns teach theology. Singing in worship is *preaching set to a tune*.

A good church musician understands all that. They know the music of worship is offered in praise of God. It wants to open the hearts and minds, the bodies and lives of those who hear it and sing it, to the power of God’s love in this world. Whether it’s a lament or a cry for help or a plea for justice, when the song is sung it is directed to God. And God hears.

Like a psalmist of old, a good church musician, to borrow from Kierkegaard, *wills one thing* and one thing only with their music: *the praise of God*, the praise of God through voice uplifted and the sound of timbrel and harp, of horn and strings and tambourine and loud clashing cymbals.

And, sometimes, the pipe organ.

Today we say farewell to our organist, our Minister of Music and the Arts, Melanie Ohnstad, who has been making music in worship here at Westminster for 24 years. Melanie understands the purpose of her work: *to make music to the glory of God*. Her gifts were given so the word of God could be preached in song and in music.

Having had the privilege of planning and leading worship with her through 20 years and thousands of services, I can attest to the fact that Melanie never loses her focus. From the organ bench or piano, with a string quartet or brass quintet, with a musician from China or India or Mexico or Cuba or Cameroon, with a solo Native American flute or an Arabic band, with cello and flute and percussion as we heard today, she has always willed one thing with music: to make it an act of the worship of God.

Westminster has grown as we have been led in worship by Melanie. The faith of this congregation has been nurtured and nourished, challenged and stretched by the sound of God's word reaching us through rich melody and purposeful rhythm. A fugue one week, a toccata the next; the sung prayer of Taize one day and bluegrass the next.

What a feast. What a feast for our ears and our hearts, but most of all, for our God. We have worshipped well, lifting our song to the Creator, who receives our praise, we can only hope, with great joy.

Now...back to the imagined choir. They have gone through their warm-up. Those old psalm singers are set to lead us. And the One who is the source of every tune is listening, ready for the drama to begin.

What song shall we sing?

How about this one:

O sing to the LORD a *new* song,
for God has done marvelous things...

Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth;
break forth into joyous song and sing praises.
(Ps. 98: 1, 5)

Let's sing a doxology of gratitude to God, of thanksgiving, for Melanie, for the music, for our life as a congregation, and for the steadfast love of the One *from whom all blessings flow*.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.