

## A New Song

Matthew 9:18-26, Psalm 33:1-12

“Sing to God a new song; play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts.” Psalm 33:3

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Anne Lamott writes terrific books laced with candor and courage. Her most recent, entitled *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, is no exception. In it, she often refers to the small Presbyterian congregation that became her spiritual home after years of bad choices and battles with self-destructive tendencies. She teaches Sunday school. She brings juice boxes and bags of corn chips for the kids in her class. There are eleven of them: four black, four white, two Mexican, and one Asian. Children make her nervous, but she teaches Sunday school anyway, because, in the beginning, there was no one else to do it. When she began, she didn't know exactly what a good lesson plan might be. One day, she had the children throw a beach ball around the room to each other as they recited Bible verses. The only problem was that the boys quickly turned the Bible verse game into a ferocious game of dodge ball. Happily, no one was injured.

She goes to worship and listens carefully to the sermons that her pastor, Veronica, delivers. Veronica is a tall African American woman with “huge, gentle doctor's hands” who “sings sometimes to her congregation.” One Sunday, Veronica preached on the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm and explained why a shepherd would anoint the heads of his sheep with oil. Can you imagine why? To keep flies away! Another time, she told the story of Rahab, the prostitute in the Old Testament who saved the Israelites' lives and became included in God's great plan of redemption.

The best chapter in Lamott's book begins this way: “My pastor Veronica said yesterday that God constantly tells us to rejoice, but to do that, to get our ‘jice back, we need to have had it before. And it's never been needed as badly as now, when the world is hurting so badly, because joy is medicine.” (p. 179) Thousands of years before wise Veronica preached that word, the Psalmist had written exactly the same prescription for the people of God. “Be glad in the Lord and

rejoice,” he wrote. “Rejoice, sing to the Lord a new song, play skillfully on the strings with loud shouts...” It seems that throughout the ages, the most reliable way to get your ‘jovice back is not with words, but with music. It breaks a preacher’s heart to have to say it, but it is true. “When the words run out, music keeps going.” As the wonderful preacher Barbara Brown Taylor puts it,

I can preach the best Christmas sermon I have ever preached. But as far as my congregation is concerned, the Savior will not be born until we have sung “*Oh, Little Town of Bethlehem.*” I can pray the best Easter prayer that’s ever been prayed, but until we sing “*Jesus Christ is Risen Today,*” he is not. The healing at a funeral begins not with the eulogy but with the singing of the hymns, and particularly the Easter hymns. A child’s religious education begins not with Bible stories but with songs, songs that will inspire and inform that child as long as he or she lives.

One of the greatest theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Karl Barth, was asked on his deathbed how he would sum up his life’s work – volumes and volumes of brilliant books, so heavy that in Europe they are sold by the pound. He did not even stop to think, “Jesus loves me, this I know,” he said, ‘for the Bible tells me so. (*Beyond Words*)

Today we celebrate the music ministry of Morningside, affirming the lasting truth that rings from words written by Martin Luther over three hundred years ago: “Music is to be praised as second only to the Word of God, because by music, are all the emotions swayed. Nothing on earth is more mighty to make the sad happy, the happy sad, to hearten the downcast, to mellow the overweening, temper the exuberant, or mollify the vengeful...Music is one of the most magnificent presents God has given the human creature.”

Let me enumerate a few of the things that happen, Walter and the chancel choir, when you do your thing, and we join you in doing it. The first is that you issue an invitation to each of us to leave behind our loneliness and step into the fellowship of praise. I love to think of our joining with one another and with the saints of every time and place who have sung their praises to God. In a wonderful novel by Wendell Berry called *Jayber Crow*, a young bachelor gives an account of what happens to him when he sings in church. “What I liked least about going to the service,”

he says, “was the prayers; what I liked better was the singing. Not all hymns could move me. I never liked ‘*Onward Christen Soldiers*,’ Jesus’ military career has never compelled my belief. But I liked the sound of people singing together, whatever they sang, but some of the hymns reached into me all the way to the bone: ‘*Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing*,’ ‘*Rock of Ages*,’ ‘*Amazing Grace*,’ ‘*O God, Our Help in Ages Past*.’ I loved the different voices all singing one song, the various tongues and qualities, the passing lifts of feeling, rising up and going out forever. And in times of sorrow, when they sang ‘*Abide with Me*,’ I could not raise my head.” (p.162-163)

Music invites us out of isolation and into the fellowship of the saints. It also draws us from self-centeredness and into God-centeredness. What a mercy. I cannot imagine anything more merciful in this era of exaggerated self-importance than to get straight about who is the center of the universe. It is not we ourselves. This is God’s world. We can never be truly joyful if our lives are centered only in ourselves. Barbara Brown Taylor makes note of the fact that it wasn’t so long ago that

...only doctors had pagers, and the only person who carried a telephone around with him was the President of the United States, in case of a nuclear attack. Now, we are all important, everyone one of us. When a [telephone] goes off in a roomful of people, a banner unfurls over the person’s head: “I am important. I am indispensable. They cannot do without me.”

In worship, we remember that God is more important than we are and that the world does not depend on us. The world and all its creatures depend upon the grace of God. As H. Richard Niebuhr once put it, “We must remember that we are in the grip of a power that neither asks for our consent before it brings us into existence nor asks for our agreement to continue in being beyond our death. To praise God is to acknowledge that we neither make nor keep ourselves.” To offer our praise to the one God is to remember that all the other gods around us are the ones who do not bless us. “They are the ones from whom no blessings flow.” (Walter Bruggemann, *Cadences of Home: Preaching among the Exiles*, p. 128).

This past Christmas, when our choir presented portions of Handel's *Messiah*, they sang these words, "For the kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ: and he shall reign forever and ever and ever and ever. Hallelujah, hallelujah". When you sang that, we remembered that whatever was ruling our lives at the time, whatever destroys the world's hope is a false god. The stock market, the shopping mall, the secular culture, they do not have what it takes. Only God has life- giving redemption to offer.

Music saves us from idolatry. It also saves us from cynicism. You and I will never get our 'joice back if we allow ourselves to sink into that peculiar human defeat called cynicism. Psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan once described a cynic this way, [A cynic is a defeated person] "whose attitude seems to be 'If I cannot be great, then by God, there can be no greatness!'"

Do you remember how Jesus went to the home of the leader whose daughter had died? The funeral had already started. The casket was about to be brought down the aisle. The musicians were playing the funereal music on their flutes. Jesus said, "Go away, leave me alone with her. I will give her life." Cynically the people laughed, demonstrating that they had failed to take into account the life-giving power of God. It is actually present in this world.

There are two kinds of people, aren't there? Those who hope and those who say there is no reason to hope. Jesus went into the room and took the girl by the hand and she rose. How did he do it? Only God knows. But that he did it, that it is possible for life to emerge in even the most hopeless situations, this is the Good News the church has to share.

Ann Lamott was drawn to the little Presbyterian church in California because of the music. She would walk by and hear the people singing. She would lean against the door. Only after months of standing outside and listening, did she come in and take her seat in a folding chair in the back. "Something inside of me that was stiff and rotting began to feel soft and tender...Standing with them singing, sometimes so shaky and sick I felt like I might tip over, I felt bigger than myself, like I was being taken care of, being tricked into coming back to life." That's the kind of thing music can do.

Over a year ago, Al and I slipped into Morningside for the first time. A friend had told us that the music was good here, and so we came, and so it was. It was the music that convinced me to talk to the pulpit nominating committee several months later. It was the music that told me that this community was ready and willing to sing a new song in a new chapter of its life, for a new generation of people, many of whom had been standing at the door of the Christian church wondering, “Is there a place for me here? Is there healing here? Should I have hope for the world?” The cynic in us laughs at the very idea, but the hope in us says “yes.” That’s what the music says: “Yes.”

A couple of days ago, I paid a visit to the newest member of our church family, Kate Parrish. She weighed in at a little over six pounds on Tuesday night. She is amazing, as are all newborns. It’s hard to say anything original about a baby. You talk about who the baby looks like. You comment on the fingers and toes. But mainly, you marvel. You marvel at the mystery of life. You can’t wait to come to church and sing praise to God in whose image Kate is made, a perfect little bundle of flesh and blood, shining with the image of God. What are you going to do? You’re going to rejoice in the Lord. That is what you’re going to do! “Bless the Lord, oh my soul. Let all that is in me bless God’s holy name.” Amen.