

“Sing a New Song to the Lord, All the Earth” - Psalm 96

Many in the Marquand community will remember John Bell’s visit from March of this year, and know that he has much to say about singing! He calls this title passage, which appears in some form or another throughout the psalms, the 11th Commandment.¹ Even the least literal of scripture readers among us would have a hard time getting around this very straightforward statement. Do what? Sing. Sing what? A *new* song. To whom? To God. Who should sing? *All* the earth!

And yet today, in our pews in our churches, and in American society in general, we find that much of the earth is not singing any song, much less a new one, never mind to Whom! Reasons abound, both within the church and without.

We live in a media culture in which the most popular show on television is a singing contest that draws in millions of viewers and voters (would that so many would vote in government elections!). It would seem that this powerful pop-culture force would encourage its many fans to give singing a try. But if you watch closely the beginning-of-the-new-season commercials, the only singers shown are the ones who are extremely off-pitch, breathy, screechy, or otherwise cringeworthy. In earlier seasons, these auditions were very brief, but in the past few years, the show’s producers have tried to spot folks in the gathered crowd who looked “weird” or otherwise like they might give a poor audition. They now interview them heavily, asking about their hopes and dreams, then juxtapose those desires with footage of predictably bad auditions. And the judges now ask for a *second* song, knowing full well the singer will fare no better, but that the producers will have more embarrassing footage to share with the world.

American Idol is an overwhelming force in current media culture, and the effects of the humiliation portion of the show will have long-lasting consequences for those of us who are interested in encouraging communal singing. A powerful cultural message comes across in the scant passing seconds of the ad - “Unless you have a recording contract, a conservatory degree, or a voice that will shake the rafters, *do not sing!* You’ll only embarrass yourself and annoy those around you.” How completely counter-cultural is it then, to say “Sing to the Lord a new song, all the earth” - and to truly live into the reality of that command?

As Bell notes, many folks have been told, whether by a teacher, a teenage daughter, or a prom date, that they should not sing - (“*Almost Paradise* is my favorite slow dance - please don’t spoil it by humming in my ear.”) It’s possible the singer just had a cold, or a bad night, or was slightly confused at the time- but the embarrassment of being told that your voice is not sufficiently beautiful to be heard by others often leads to life-long disempowerment, vocal and otherwise.²

And yet we are told to move past that embarrassment, dig deep to resurrect that voice and use it to sing a new song.

In our current media world, nearly all recorded music -jazz, rock, pop, classical, gospel, contemporary Christian - represents an unattainable reality. As recording technology has improved, the music we listen to is ever-more-perfect, and therefore further away from what the average human singer, pianist, guitarist - most any musician - can regularly attain. Recordings are routinely digitally spliced and tuned, and that gap between what we *hear* and what we’re able to *do* only widens. And we are listening to more perfect recordings of more perfect music throughout more of our days (ipods, iphones, perfect music on the go) than ever before.

¹ John L. Bell, *The Singing Thing* (Chicago: GIA, 2000) p83.

² Bell, 95-102.

And yet, with digitally unretouched voices, we are to sing.
And why?

We sing because music has an uncanny ability to place memory deep within our bones. The next time you're looking up files on your computer and you come to a funny part of the alphabet, see if you don't find yourself singing somewhere in your marrow "h-i-j-k-l-m-n-o-p." My beloved grandmother Rosy, in the last stages of her life was unable to form sentences beyond the third or fourth word, which she kept repeating. But when I sang "It's very clear..." she could respond "our love is here to stay..." And she knew better than I that it's the Rockies that crumble and Gibraltar that tumbles.

The theology that we call upon in the time of our deepest need is not necessarily the theology we have *heard*; it is much more likely the theology we have *sung*, because that is the theology that is deepest in our hearts. In New York on 9/11, strangers were not gathering on street corners to quote the best sermon they'd ever heard. We were gathering to sing "Amazing Grace" in the West Village, "Imagine" at Strawberry Fields in Central Park, "Shalom Alechem" in Union Square, and "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around" at the edge of the West Side Highway, as the trucks of rescue workers were emerging from the ash. This human urge to sing together in times of trouble has helped to sustain God's people through slavery, apartheid, holocaust, and disaster. The song deepest within us has great liberating power.

Imagine being cut off from this great tradition – if we'd only heard, not sung, not learned by heart the great hymns of faith; songs from the global church; spirituals and gospel songs; hymns that speak of the wideness of God's mercy, the understanding of God's presence and God's people in our day and time. What is it then, that we would draw on in the time of our deepest need? What of the world's deepest need?

In this particular week, voices have been invited and lifted up in Quaker meeting; on Tuesday we will join our voices with Spanish-speaking saints as we set a welcome table and hear the stories of immigrants among us; on Thursday, the words of St. Francis will be on our lips with the much-beloved "All Creatures of Our God and King"; on Friday, as Profs. Tom Troeger and Martin Jean lead us in a Festival Eucharist on the weekend of the organ dedication, we will sing the *newest* of new songs – a hymn written for this occasion with text by Professor Troeger, and music by Marquand Chapel Choir co-director Dominick DiOrio.

In the middle, on Wednesday, we begin a new cycle of Sung Morning Prayer. This version – "Traditional Texts in Global and Contemporary Settings" – is well known to returning students. Many have remarked that this setting- in which we sing *O Worship the King* in an Indonesian mode, *Love Divine* in Mark Miller's jazz-inspired setting, and Isaac Watts' beloved *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross* in a six-part South African *Senzenina* setting – helps them to hear familiar words in new ways – to gain new inspiration and insight from texts that are so well known that they sometimes might slip into rote repetition with the tunes many have known from childhood. It is not our intention to replace those familiar tunes forever, but to sing in wonder at these words reinterpreted.

We sing Bobby McFerrin's chanted setting of *Psalms 23* (dedicated to his mother, his own paraphrase of the psalm text uses feminine pronouns for God.) Christian Tamaela, whose *We Wait for New Heavens* we now know by heart, offers a Javanese tune for the Lord's prayer. But in my mind, the part of this SMP setting that best exemplifies our ecumenical life together in Marquand is Calvin Hampton's gorgeous setting of "There's a Wideness in God's Mercy."

In my first year here, one of our chapel organists, an Episco-Baptist from Alabama, recommended this setting from the 1982 Episcopal hymnal. Most folks in chapel didn't know it, including most of the Episcopalians (perhaps because the same text is set to a much easier-to-

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play tune on a nearby page). So we all learned it together – the three verses in the 1982 hymnal, as well as an additional verse from the original Frederick Faber text: “But we make God’s love too narrow with false limits of our own, and we magnify God’s strictness with a zeal Love cannot own.” Because we repeat the same sung morning prayer setting for at least four weeks, this hymn had time to sink into people’s hearts, to become the theology deepest within. By the end of the cycle, most folks – Episcopalian, Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, UCC, Catholic, Pentecostal – could hear the haunting introductory melody and sing by heart the three Episcopalian verses, plus the “extra” *very* traditional verse in a decidedly “new song.” Most folks don’t think of this as an Episcopal hymn any more, but a hymn we all know and love. (And the Lutherans have picked it up in their new 2007 hymnal!)

In daily ecumenical worship in Marquand chapel, we are re-telling, re-living, and re-singing the story of redemption as we rehearse both for the work we are to do in the world, and for that great day when all voices will be resurrected and raised in the praise of God.

-Patrick Evans