

SING TO THE LORD

PSALM 96

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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On a Sunday where our Scripture reading exhorts us to “sing a new song,” I want to begin, perhaps surprisingly, by talking about oldness.

Earlier this week, I had coffee with an Anglican colleague. We talked about how we do church.

He comes from an evangelical background and has worked in a number of churches over the years, from solo pastoring at tiny Baptist churches to being one member of a large team at an evangelical mega-church. His spiritual journey has taken a long winding journey that has led to ordination in the Anglican Church.

Like many evangelical converts to the “high churches,” one of the things that attracted him was the historical weight and solidity of the liturgy. The “oldness” of it, if you will.

He liked praying old prayers and sing old songs. He liked observing old rituals like “processing” in to the sanctuary. He appreciated having communion every Sunday.

For someone who spent a lot of time in the world of evangelicalism, he found (and finds) this deep connection to history, the absence of desire to “keep up” with what other churches are doing and put on a better show enormously attractive.

So do I.

I remember when I first started here at LMC six years ago being struck by how we still used hymnals and songbooks. Most of the churches I had been a part of over the previous few decades had pretty much abandoned the hymnal in favour of words projected on screens.

I liked the simplicity of our singing here. I liked that you could hear yourself sing (even if, in the case of my own contribution, what I suddenly found myself able to hear wasn't terribly inspiring).

I appreciated the theological depth of some of the old songs. They seemed sturdier and more theologically robust than some of the more popular songs.

Now, if you would have known me earlier in my life, you might have been surprised to hear me say all of this.

As a child, I don't recall having much fondness for the hymnal. I thought hymns were boring and repetitive. I liked the newer songs better. I apparently didn't notice that the new songs were often at least as repetitive as the hymns, just in a different way! I also didn't seem to understand the basic truth that repetition isn't necessarily bad—it's how human beings learn and grow.

But I was not to be dissuaded. New was cool and I wanted to be cool. I played bass guitar in something like a Christian pop worship band when I was in my early twenties. We toured around southern Alberta playing at various youth events. We even recorded a CD.

(I'll give you a moment to recover from the shock of that particular revelation.)

Back then, my main criteria for what constituted a good song for worship were, "Do I like how it sounds?" and "Can I play it?"

The words to some of the songs we played back then now make me cringe. They were pretty thin theologically (at best), and focused almost exclusively on the emotional attachment that the worshiper was supposed to feel towards God.

My tastes started changing in my late twenties and early thirties. I went to graduate school and had the opportunity to attend chapels at Regent College regularly for three years. There I was exposed to songs that had the rare combination of being theologically

sound and played with great skill. There were violins and various forms of percussion and pianos and guitars and flutes. It was often very beautiful. Chapel services at Regent were thoughtfully crafted and often deeply moving.

Increasingly, I found myself drawn not to Christian versions of whatever was popular on the radio but to songs with four stanzas and refrains and poetic language. I found myself appreciating responsive readings and more thoughtful and regular participation in the Lord's Supper. I was drawn to silence and art and imagery.

Maybe all of this is just something that inevitably happens as one gets older, I don't know.

I suppose you could say that my categories have expanded a bit when it comes to music. I still like variety in instruments and styles of songs. I like simple choruses with guitars and drums; I also like majestic hymns with pianos or organs (a few weeks ago at the ecumenical service at St. Augustine's for the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, I had the opportunity to worship with an organ!). But I have less patience for lazy words and sloppy theology than I once did.

We sing what we believe to be true about God and about ourselves. At least we should.

And I know that not every song gets everything right. Some of you have told me that you cringe when certain lines come in certain songs or that you choose not to sing certain songs because you don't like the theology. I get that.

I know that "new" is not necessarily better. One song I've encountered a few times in various worship contexts is called "How He Loves," which contains the following cringe-worthy line:

So heaven meets earth like a sloppy wet kiss

The less said about that particular line the better, probably.

And yet we also know that "old" is not necessarily better, either. The nineteenth century hymn "Trust and Obey" is one that I've long struggled to sing:

Not a shadow can rise, not a cloud in the skies,
But His smile quickly drives it away;

Not a doubt or a fear, not a sigh or a tear,
Can abide while we trust and obey.

Really? Is the Christian life of trust and obedience really one with no clouds, doubts, fears, sighs, or tears? Are we not also called to lament and feel the pain of the world?

I suspect that for someone who is struggling with doubt and fear or who is going through a particularly dark time in their faith or their lives, this might be a tough song to sing!

At any rate, *all* this is to say that if you are inclined to be suspicious of the word “new” when it comes to music, I understand. Perhaps you have been through the “worship wars” in a previous church. Maybe you’ve seen divisions come about because one group wanted contemporary songs on a screen and some wanted the old hymns.

I know that there have been painful moments in the life of churches based on how and what we sing!

Yet my experience thus far in the church and with music and singing has taught me this. At our best, we do well to pay attention to old songs and liturgies and prayers that have nourished Christ’s church for hundreds, even thousands of years...

And...

... to do what Psalm 96 urges us to do: *Sing to the Lord a new song.*

We need both and we need to do both well.

I want to break the remainder of my sermon into two parts based on two parts of the opening verse of Psalm 96: “Sing” and “to the Lord.”

Why do we sing?

We sing for a number of reasons.

First, on a very basic level, we sing because music moves us as human beings.

This week, Gord Downie, the lead singer of the Canadian band “The Tragically Hip” passed away at the relatively young age of 53 due to brain cancer. I’m not sure how many “Hip” fans we have among us this morning (I would count myself as one), but it has been fascinating to observe the effect that has passed has had on people and what it says about the role music plays in our lives.

As you may know, the outpouring of grief and support has been incredible. Everyone from Justin Trudeau to Don Cherry has weighed in with their condolences. I am told that almost one in three Canadians tuned in to their last concert in Kingston, ON last year! Music deeply affects people.

Music evokes emotion. If you doubt this, try watching a movie some time with the mute button and subtitles on and then watch it with the volume on. Music plays a powerful role in drawing out sadness and joy and empathy and all kinds of other emotions.

Music inspires us. Almost all of my writing, whether sermons or other writing, takes place with my headphones on. I know this doesn’t work for everyone, but it does for me.

We sing because it binds us together and because it’s good for our health. Here’s how Marilyn McEntyre put it in a recent article called “Choosing Church” (an article I highly recommend, incidentally!):

Singing is one way to "enter into God's courts." Few places are left where people gather and sing. Yet neuroscientists say that singing together promotes integration of brain functions, alleviates depression, and promotes mental health. When we sing we learn viscerally and audibly what it means to be "one in the Spirit."¹

Those who were at Doris’s funeral on Monday will have seen this truth in action. It was a very simple service and we only sang two songs: “The Old Rugged Cross” and “Amazing Grace.” I suspect that many who had gathered were not familiar or even comfortable with singing together.

But these were familiar songs and gradually the gathered community grew into the songs. They became a shared way of honouring Doris’s life because we knew these songs meant something to her and her family. It was a moving experience.

¹ <https://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/5114/choosing-church/>

We sing because our spirits are lifted and we are bound together in community by the act of singing. Those of you who have had the opportunity to worship at one of our larger Mennonite conferences know this full well. It can be a powerful experience. I'm sure Paul and Joani experienced this last weekend in Winnipeg.

For me, I often think of attending Mennonite World Conference two years ago in Pennsylvania. The music and the singing were incredible, with all kinds of languages and styles and voices joined together. Even our kids commented on how it affected them.

Speaking of our kids, they are both singing in the RJC choir this year. I think they are both experiencing first hand the truth of the communal value of singing. They've told me how much they enjoy this, particularly Claire. I cling to these conversations when I am forced to endure some of their other musical choices. 😊

And we are bound together not just by isolated experiences but by worshiping over long periods of times using things like hymnals and songbooks. A hymnal—whether the act of producing it or the act of using it in the weekly worship—is a communal artifact. We are knit together with other Christians across time and space who have been nourished by these same words and music and we are together drawn closer to God.

So, that's the first part of Psalm 96:1: "Sing" There are *so* many good reasons to sing.

But as Christians we don't just sing because it is psychologically or socially useful to do so.

We sing—new songs, old songs, and everything in between—***to the Lord.***

Those last three words are pretty important!

We don't sing *to* ourselves or *about* ourselves. This is one of the most persistent critiques of many newer songs—they often are focused less on God than on ourselves and what God wants to do for us, in us, through us.

We don't sing primarily *for* ourselves, although as I've said it does us great good to sing. The last thing our cultural moment needs is yet another opportunity for us to make something all about us! We're already quite good at this!

No, we sing *to the Lord*.

We see this in our passage today, which is, of course, a song. The Psalms were Israel's hymnbook (and it was a hymnbook that took shape over a long period of time with "new songs" being added along the way). The Psalms are also the church's hymnbook.

We are urged to sing a new song... Why?

- Because the Lord is above all gods—singing is a guard against idolatry
- Because God has done marvelous deeds of creation liberation, redemption—and because we do well to remember these things, whether in the broader story of salvation or in the things God has done in our own lives.
- Because God is holy; and we sometimes need songs to communicate this well. Sometimes I listen to classical/choral music on CBC Radio 2. I am struck by how even in our secular times so much of the music that captivates us is "sacred" in nature—it was composed as a response to the holiness and majesty of God
- Because we are part of a creation that joins with us in declaring God's praises (the image on the front of your bulletins and on the screen portrays this beautifully!)
- Because God comes to judge the earth in righteousness, faithfulness, and truth

Wait, we're supposed to sing in anticipation of God's judgment? Maybe that doesn't seem particularly praiseworthy to you! At the very least, not a cause for singing!

But who among us doesn't look with anticipation and joy to God making the world right, judging what is evil, false, corrupt, dehumanizing? Validating and blessing all that is right and praiseworthy, excellent and true?

In our popular discourse, we sometimes give the impression that there can be no worse thing than to be "judged" or to be "judgmental." But God's judgment is what the world desperately needs. It is what *we* desperately need.

And we can sing in anticipation of it because we know that unlike our judgments which are always coloured with sin and selfishness, God judges with truth, with faithfulness, and with righteousness.

This is good news. And this is why we sing.

We sing in recognition of who we are and how we are made; we sing because of who God is and what God has done; we sing in anticipation of what God will yet do for us and for all of creation.

And we will keep singing until God's kingdom comes on earth as in heaven.

May God continue to enliven our song.

Amen.

