

Sing a Different Song – But Don't Change My Favorite Hymns!
Isaiah 12:2-6

Many of you were present for the choir's Cantata during worship last Sunday.

Not only was it musically beautiful, but for me it also evoked an unexpected visceral response.

Every cell in my body seemed to be
echoing the universal sacred heartbeat
encompassed in

organ,
brass,
percussion
and voice.

In those moments, I had an experience of the Holy:
God was present in each note, each vibration.

And my whole being – mind, body, emotion, spirit – was affected by that encounter with the Divine.

Music is one of the ways we get in touch with God with more than our very active brains.

Think about how many times scripture admonishes us to “sing!” “Make a joyful noise!” “Come into God's presence with singing!”

And how many times in scripture do we hear the song of someone expressing praise, sorrow, longing, anger, joy, thanksgiving? We have a whole book of Psalms that do just that.

And consider which pieces of music never fail to draw you closer to the core of your faith,
which hymns help you sink
into the depths of
the Divine's presence.

Christmas carols are like that for many people – getting you into the spirit of the season with just a few familiar notes. And this is why many of us tend to get upset when anyone dares change the words –
because this is a part of our sacred connection.

Those of you who are familiar with the *New Century Hymnal* in the pew before you know what I'm talking about – we sing *Good Christian Friends Rejoice*

rather than the customary *Good Christian Men Rejoice*;

and in *It Came Upon the Midnight Clear*

“peace on the earth good will to men from heaven's all-gracious King”
becomes

“peace on the earth, good will to all, great news of joy we bring”.

Is it really okay to change the words like that?

I'll tell you straight out that I'm of differing minds with many internal contradictions on this question.

Many of you know how I feel about inclusive language:

that the language we use,
whether we intend it or not,
creates lasting images in our minds and
develops either inclusive or non-inclusive understandings
deep within us.

No matter how you say it,
naming God *King* or *Lord*
evokes an image of an old man on a throne for our kids –
and that memory stays with us into adulthood.

Yet many of my favorite hymns and carols were written in a time when nobody thought about such things –
God most certainly was male
because that was the only way to comprehend God in relationship with us.
That was truth,
and there was nothing to question!

And so our songs come to us with a little historical baggage.
And I recognize that as I continue to choose to sing along with them on the radio,
reconnecting with my childhood,
reveling in Christmas sentiments that soaked in long before my brain began to
question parts of the faith I was taught.

Yes, I have an internal contradiction in my experience of Christmas carols –
I want both the words that I learned as a kid AND
the faithful new words we use during worship!

When Advent began, I adamantly told Jamie that this year I wasn't going to worry about how completely
opposed I am to some of the Christian sentiments on my favorite childhood Christmas albums –
“I'm just going to sing along without theological guilt,” I told her, “even if they're sappy and
pie-in-the-sky-baby-Jesus-brings-peace-to-the-world whatever I'm just going to enjoy them.”
Jamie laughed, having teased me every year about those same albums.

The transformation of some of our favorite hymns and carols is a challenge –
but it's not a new concept to rewrite a song's words;
there is biblical precedent!

This morning's reading from the prophet Isaiah is itself a song:
“Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously;
let this be known in all the earth.
Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion,
for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.”

Isaiah offered this song to his people for their time and place – a time of struggle and discouragement.
And the people who heard this song from the prophet's lips
would have recognized it immediately as one of their favorite hymns:
it was *Moses'* song,
following the Israelites' escape from Egypt,
rejoicing on the far banks of the Red Sea.

Listen for the connection:
from the book of Exodus chapter 15:
“Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord...
‘The Lord is my strength and my might, and he has become my salvation;
this is my God, and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him’”;

and then from Isaiah:

“I will trust and not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my might;
he has become my salvation.”

It was Moses’ song and a faithful favorite that evoked in the people of Israel
memories of release from captivity,
a sense of God’s possibilities,
a feeling of hope.

The people knew and loved it – but Isaiah changed the words.
Instead of singing about Pharaoh’s armies being drowned in the sea,
Isaiah sings of joyfully drawing from the well of hope and salvation.

Why’d he change the words?

Because he understood that this familiar song
evoked the core of the people’s faith,
a song known in their sinew and soul,
passed down through generations
like their very own musical genetic code.

Isaiah changed some of the words of this well-known hymn
because he knew the people’s current circumstances,
their new understandings of truths in their modern world.

*The hymn of faith that takes them deep,
can speak to their current circumstances
and still hold them in faith.*

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Mary, whose Magnificat the choir interpreted so boldly last Sunday, did the same thing.

Mary sang her praise and hope and expectation  
all from her own immediate circumstances –  
but she didn’t make up her song, either.  
She reinterpreted a favorite hymn of her people  
to speak to her current experience.

Mary’s Magnificat was also Hannah’s song,  
again from the Hebrew Bible –  
it was the celebration of a woman  
upon the dedication of her son to God  
(you can find it in the book of 1st Samuel, named for Hannah’s son<sup>1</sup>).

When Luke’s original hearers first encountered the song of Mary,  
I wonder if they felt as uncomfortable or disjointed as some of us do  
when faced with our own reinterpreted Christmas carols?

Or if they took it as standard practice  
to take the familiar,  
the beloved texts and hymns and stories of their faith,  
and reinterpret them for new experiences of God:  
bringing the tradition and that which  
already connects us with the Holy  
into current understanding, present faith;  
so that it cannot become antiquated  
and appropriate for admiring on a corner pedestal  
but not really be practical or applicable to our lives?

*Re-interpretation of tradition  
is an inherent part of our Judeo-Christian  
tradition.*

*We're NOT just being politically correct  
by reinterpreting the songs of our faith –  
we're being faithful to our tradition  
and our still-speaking God.*

We are a community of faith who diligently questions the “truths” that our forebears handed down to us – yet we still strongly need a deep connection to Spirit.

We need the relationship that comes when we let go and experience God –  
like in a visceral, bodily, spiritual response to the choir  
as it crescendos with Mary’s song of praise,  
lovingly lifted from Hannah’s own experience of the Divine.

This is why we continue to sing our cherished Christmas carols –  
to keep us tied to that experience of God that goes beyond the brain –  
and that is why we also reinterpret them for the truths of *our* day, *our* experiences –  
so we can be faithful to what we know of God,  
and God’s ever-evolving relationship with humanity.

This Christmas, as every Christmas, Hal and I encourage you to sing the songs as your spirit calls to you –  
familiar words or new – but be faithful in doing so; be faithful to your experience of God this season –  
faithful in mind, body, emotion and spirit.

And sing!

With Mary and Hannah,  
with Isaiah and Moses,  
with one another in this place and time.

Sing your experience of God.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> 1 Samuel 2:1-10 and Luke 1:46-55.