

“How Can We Keep from Singing?”

Psalm 98

The Rev. Hal Chorpenning, Plymouth Congregational UCC, 24 Aug 03

“As for public prayers,” wrote John Calvin, “there are two kinds: one consists simply of speech, the other of song....And indeed, we know from experience that singing has great strength and power to move and to set our hearts on fire.” So much for the notion that Calvinists were a staid, stodgy, life-negating lot.

The history of church music, of course, goes back far, far beyond Calvin, in fact it goes back far beyond Christianity, to the Psalms, which, of course, was essentially the hymnal of the people of Israel. In the 98th Psalm that we heard this morning, we hear a song of praise, honoring God for victory and deliverance. “Make a joyful noise,” says the Psalmist, as we “sing to the Lord a new song.”

Yet, the emotional vocabulary of the Psalms goes far beyond praise. There are songs that demand vengeance from God, like Psalm 109: “Do not be silent, O God of my praise. For wicked and deceitful mouths are opened against me, speaking against me with lying tongues. They beset me with words of hate, and attack me without cause.... May his days be few; may another seize his position. May his children be orphans, and his wife a widow. May his children wander about and beg; may they be driven out of the ruins they inhabit. May the creditor seize all that he has; may strangers plunder the fruits of his toil.”

There are psalms that express thanksgiving, psalms that extol the royalty, and of course, psalms of lament, as we hear in Psalm 137 that describes the horror of the exile: “By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there, we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked us for mirth, saying, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion.’”

So, the psalms reveal something really central about our music and about our relationship with God: we don’t have to be happy all the time; we can have a full range of emotions and express those feelings to God. If we’re *angry*, we can say it, pray, or sing it. If we’re *joyful*, we can say it, pray it, or sing it. If we’re *grief-stricken*, we can say it, pray it, or sing it.

One shortcoming of modern “praise music” is that it has a rather limited emotional vocabulary; it has only a happy voice. That doesn’t mean that it’s inauthentic or that it’s wrong. Like any one musical style, it has its limitations. The vocabulary of any church music must be broad, to encompass the full range of human experience...not just praise and joy, but also lament and conviction. We have to bring our fullest selves into worship, and that’s why we need good quality hymns, new and old.

Music during the Reformation became absolutely central to the religious movement that birthed the Protestant churches. Martin Luther wrote that the early church fathers and mothers “desired that music should always abide in the church. That is why there are so many songs and psalms.” Luther was committed to strong congregational singing in the vernacular language. The magnificent German *Chorale* tradition, which reached its acme with J.S. Bach and Heinrich Schütz.

Our side of the family, the Reformed tradition, which emanated from the leadership of John Calvin, relied exclusively on metrical setting of the Psalms. And originally, all singing was congregational (there were no choirs), everything was in unison (there was no harmony), and sung unaccompanied (no organs). Calvin’s *Genevan Psalter* was completed in 1562, and more than 30,000 copies were sold in that year alone.

The other famous Psalter in our tradition is the Bay Psalm Book, published by our Puritan forbears in Cambridge, Mass. in 1640. Returning to the *Genevan Psalter* for a moment, we sing from it almost every Sunday, when we sing our doxology to the tune “Old Hundredth,” which was the setting for the Psalm 100.

That reminds me, do you ever notice that when we list the hymns, we also include the name of the tune or setting? (So, when we sing “O God, Our Help in Ages Past,” we sing it to the tune St. Anne. Most of our hymn texts and their tunes were not originally combined; in fact some were written hundreds of years apart. While both the composer, William Croft (organist at Westminster Abbey), and the hymn writer Isaac Watts (a Congregational minister in London) lived at the roughly the same time, the hymn and the tune weren’t matched up until more than a hundred years after they were both dead. (Let’s sing one verse; it’s **hymn 25** in the *New Century Hymnal*.)

Isaac Watts really can be called the father of hymnody. He wrote more than 600 hymns and hymns and psalm paraphrases, which liberated Protestantism in England and New England from line-singing the psalms. There are actually 14 Watts hymns in the *New Century Hymnal*.

English hymnody took another great leap forward with Charles and John Wesley and the founding of Methodism. There was no longer a theological constraint just to use the psalms as texts, and instruments were being introduced into many Congregational churches. Some of your favorite hymns were probably written by Charles Wesley: “Hark the Herald Angels Sing!” and “Christ the Lord Is Risen Today!” are two that just about all of us know.

John Wesley offers these instructions for singing, which in plain English, address the congregation’s responsibilities: “Learn these tunes. Sing all. . . . If it is a cross to you, take it up, and you will find it a blessing. **Sing lustily and with a good courage.** Sing modestly. Sing in time. Above all sing spiritually.”

During the nineteenth century, African-American spirituals combined the horrific experience of slavery with Old Testament theology of exile and deliverance, and married them to the rhythms and melodies carried down from the traditions of West Africa. The roots of this music is present with us not just in spirituals like “When Israel Was in Egypt’s Land” and “We Are Climbing Jacob’s Ladder,” but they affected virtually all American music in the 19th and 20th centuries.

American hymnody – and theology – during the 19th century tended to focus on revivalism, a personal experience of God, and on individual salvation. The hymns of Ira Sankey and Fanny Crosby, like “Blessed Assurance” typify this school of hymns. One of the interesting aspects is that they shifted the focus from the collective to the individual, and you’ll notice that in most of these hymns, the personal pronouns are often in the first person: “Blessed assurance, Jesus **is mine**.” (Actually, I think both this hymn and those “Got Jesus” bumper stickers have it exactly backwards: Jesus isn’t mine; I *belong* to Jesus. I don’t have Jesus; Jesus has *me*.)

That first-person-only notion was challenged by the Social Gospel movement of the late 19th century challenged that notion. The Social Gospel movement wasn’t waiting around for divine judgment in the afterlife, but rather exhorted people to work to bring in the kingdom of God by taking on poverty, greed, exploitation, and lack of education. Rather than emphasizing “me” and “I,” Social Gospel hymns tended to stress “we” and “us.” Hymns like “Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life” stress social justice of the Hebrew prophets and the historical Jesus, rather than focusing on individual salvation as the primary aim of faith. Listen to these lyrics: “Where cross the crowded ways of life,

where sound the cries of clan and race, above the noise of selfish strife, O Christ, we hear your voice of grace.”

The Social Gospel was the defining force behind the creation of the *Pilgrim Hymnal* in 1903. One of the leading lights of the movement was a Congregational minister from Columbus, Ohio, named Washington Gladden, who served as a co-editor of the *Pilgrim Hymnal*. And it’s the Social Gospel movement that continues to be the defining influence in the United Church of Christ today.

In a very real sense, our hymnal shapes our theology, because we eventually know it so well. The fact that we’ve only been using the *New Century Hymnal* for about five years means, of course, that some melodies aren’t as familiar to us as “Amazing Grace” and that some hymn texts challenge our assumptions. And coming from a wide variety of backgrounds, some of us think of some hymns as familiar, while those same hymns may be virtually unknown to folks in other traditions. But, think about it this way: eventually the *New Century Hymnal* will be like a well-broken-in baseball mitt for us. Many of us who grew up in the church actually know our theology through hymnody, rather than scripture. ***See if you can continue singing these lines:***

A mighty fortress...

Joyful, joyful we adore thee...

Immortal, Invisible...

In the midst of new dimensions...

I only know one or two pieces of scripture that you most of us could complete, but I could sing 20 or 30 hymns that many of us know well. Hymns subtly shape the way we think about God and humankind.

Another less-acknowledged influence in our hymnody is the vigorous melodies that come from the Welsh church. You’ve never heard a Welsh hymn unless you’ve heard a huge chorus of Welsh coalminers belting out one of these hymns. Let’s try a verse of one that marries a Welsh tune to a Social Gospel theme. (Let’s sing the first verse of “God of Grace and God of Glory” number 436.)

British composers like Ralph Vaughn Williams, Charles Stanford, and Herbert Howells brought church music into the 20th century with flair and a healthy dose of Romanticism. And late 20th century English hymn writers like Fred Pratt Green, Fred Kaan, and Brian Wren produce fresh texts like “Bring Many Names,” “This Is a Day of New Beginnings” that speak to our current situation and our inclusive theology.

One of the most expansive areas that we still haven’t fully explored in the *New Century Hymnal* is hymns from around the world. We have Filipino, Japanese, and Chinese hymns, South African, Ghanaian, and American Indian, Spanish, Mexican, and Hawaiian hymns. But they, too, will yet shape our theology.

And I’ve heard from some of you that sometimes the hymns are difficult to sing. (Actually, I heard reports and read survey results from years past, and this *isn’t* a new phenomenon.) And some hymn tunes are harder than others, especially if they are unfamiliar to us. There are some things we can do to help the congregation with hymns that are newer to us, such as asking the organist to play the hymn through before worship, sing the new hymn over a succession of Sundays, and it will also help when we have a repaired or replaced organ that will better distinguish the melody line of the hymn.

I’m also going to ask all of *you* to make a real effort when we sing a hymn to follow John Wesley’s instructions: “Sing lustily and with a good courage.” Please don’t be bashful about your singing. This is in no way a performance – it’s worship. Nobody cares

if you sing a bit off-key. This music isn't intended as entertainment, and no one is going to judge you on how well you can or cannot sing. But, when I look out into the congregation, I see a good number of you not making the effort; ***you just can't sing without moving your lips***. So, belt it out! Sing boldly: it's fun!

And these hymns ***are*** the prayers of this congregation. They reflect our theological heritage and our current theological perspectives, which is why our hymnal is so important to our worship. It essentially functions as our second canon, our official book of worship. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel writes that "there are hardly proofs for the existence of God, but there are witnesses. Foremost among them are the Bible and music. Our liturgy is a moment in which these two witnesses come to expression."

My prayer for us as a congregation is that our music will glorify God, will touch our souls, will expand our horizons, and will offer us an avenue for true prayer.

Amen.