

Why Sing?

I Samuel 1:4-20

Mark 12:28-34

“Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.”

Why sing? Especially on a Sunday following a Friday when, once again, the world was held hostage by the horror of human hatred: *Why sing?* For some reason, the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer keep running through my head: “Only he who cries out for the Jews may sing Gregorian chant.” Yet the temptation today is simply to cry out: for the French, for the Lebanese, for the Russians, for the Syrians, music being a luxury. Scripture says otherwise. At the null point of Israel’s life, as God’s exiled people sat weeping by the rivers of Babylon, their captors taunted them, saying “Sing us one of the songs of Zion.” In response, they hung up their harps on the willow trees; but they could not keep from singing. I imagine them chanting in G minor, the key Mozart would later employ again and again to express sadness and tragedy, “Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, O Jerusalem, if I do not set Jerusalem as my highest joy.”

Throughout the days ahead, we will be tempted to hang up our harps. In this nation whose politics have been poisoned by the fear of the other, the corrosive consequence of Friday night in Paris and Thursday morning in Beirut will be heightened rhetoric, words spilt on the media to further divide and isolate and secure *us* from *them*. This is the contrapuntal fugue of our lives, a fugue not sung but shouted across the chasms of religion, race, ethnicity, ideology, and economic disparity.

And this is precisely why we, *as Christ’s church*, must sing. We sing because, in the face of the power of death, the anthem of the nation state does not avail. There is no hope to be had in princes. We sing because, on the edge of an open grave, we are an Easter people, a people who live not in the cockeyed and xenophobic optimism of becoming “great again” by the mathematics of exclusion, but in the sure and certain promise of love’s triumph over death. We both cry out for the innocent victims—the homeless and the hungry and the hunted—and we sing the scales of rejoicing that the church, throughout the ages, has been practicing for such a time as this. This is not the first reason I imagined mentioning this morning, but it is reason enough for the church to sing.

The second reason is curiously intensified in the wake of the first. According to Gerardus van der Leeuw, “Whoever praises God, sings. If [one] does not sing, [one] is not deeply affected.” The implication is that singing claims the whole of our being—from the top of our heads to the bottom of our hearts. But in what way? Physiologically, science tells us that when we sing, vibrations move through our bodies, altering our physical and emotional landscape, especially when we sing *together*. Specifically, endorphins create feelings of pleasure; oxytocin induces feelings of trust and bonding. I have no doubt that trust and bonding claimed the shaken crowd as they left the stadium singing “La Marseillaise” together. But while science can account for the way singing functions in our bodies and even prompts our emotions; science cannot begin to plumb the depths of music’s power to affect us deeply.

John Calvin knew as much about music. In an essay that extolled the unaccompanied singing of psalms, Calvin said they were like “spurs to incite us to pray to and praise God, and to meditate upon his works in order to love, fear, honor and glorify him.” When we sing psalms, he said, it is as though God were putting the words in our mouths, as though God were singing in us to exalt God’s own glory. Yet he also acknowledged that music has “a sacred and almost incredible power to move hearts in one way or another. Therefore we ought to be even more diligent in regulating it in such a way that it shall be useful to us and in no way pernicious.” Calvin was so wary of the power of music to manipulate human emotions that his caution kept many Reformed communities from singing anything but psalms in unison for centuries!

Enter the Anglicans, whose liturgy no doubt skates on the edge of emotional manipulation in the judgment of many a Calvinist. Nevertheless, in a sermon preached on a Sunday celebrating the church’s music in Canterbury Cathedral, the then Archbishop Rowan Williams comes as close as anyone I know to understanding properly why God’s gift of music affects us so deeply. He begins by *contrasting* instead of joining mathematics and music. Mathematics deals in timeless truths, he says. An equation, a proof can be “grasped visually, worked backwards and forwards.” “When we make a bid for the timeless wisdom of God (as many think religion is in the business of doing, I would add), we become impatient with...the cost of living in the world where things and people resist our will. We turn to the nightmare of mathematics, which destroys the moral world, [enacting the] ‘Final Solution’, nuclear terror, ethnic cleansing, in our scramble for purity and safety.”

In contrast, music “recovers the morality of time....Music keeps and is kept by time—requires *my* time, which is *my* flesh and blood, my life, for its performance and reception. Its meaning depends on its movement. Selected highlights tell us nothing.” The music of the church, in particular and at its best, arrests our attention, sometimes stopping us in our frantic forward motion, wresting from us our control, so that the singing of a hymn (all six verses!) may sound the depths of what it is to be human in the presence of God’s majesty and tenderness.

But more than taking our time, the church’s music is embedded in time, in a narrative that lends purpose and meaning to the time of our lives. “Each year we tell the story and it cannot be rushed,” Williams says. For church musicians, and I have worked alongside the best of them, it is the church’s music that makes the depth of the biblical narrative resound. While the spoken word is at the center of the church’s faith, the meaning and power of the word claims our whole being as we sing the story from Advent through Lent and Eastertide and Pentecost and Ordinary Time to the anticipation of the end of time on Christ the

King Sunday, which is this Sunday next. Church musicians have the story in their bones, leading God's people, year in and year out, to sing the songs of Zion as exiles in a strange land, lest we forget Jerusalem and find our tongues cleaving to the roof of our mouths.

In the back of my mind, of course, is our text. "Which commandment is the first of all," the scribe asks Jesus amid the cacophony of a religious dispute over timeless truths. Jesus answers him with the Shema. I imagine Jesus not saying but singing to the scribe in reply: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." This was no solo on Jesus' part. He sang these words with the whole of God's people throughout time: with the tribes in the wilderness who first learned to sing praises to the one God, because whoever praises God sings; with the people as they entered the land God had promised them; with generations who went up to Jerusalem, the psalms on their lips every step of the way; with the exiles in Babylon remembering Jerusalem in their laments; with the disciples on the Mount of Olives before he went out to meet his betrayer; and now with the Jews in the diaspora; here with the church that cries out for the Jews, the French, the Lebanese, even as she chants the story of God's redeeming love for all peoples.

Why sing? Because to sing is to offer ourselves completely to God. It is more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices. When Jesus sings the Shema and the great commandment, he sings as the one who alone, and for our poor sakes, yields back to God his time and self and life completely (his heart and soul, his mind and strength), giving us what he commands of us—leading me to connect the yielding singing is before God with the yielding of our financial resources to God. In case you did not notice, this is my stewardship sermon. Why sing? I can only testify that when I sing the hymns of the church Sunday in and Sunday out, something in me lets go of the grip I have on those things that I fancy I control, specifically on the things I think I need and the money I think I need to buy them. It is when I am singing that I am most prone to understand what it feels like to give myself away, to lose the life I had in mind, to open heart and mind and hand to receive the life I am destined to live in God's grasp. When I cannot make it through "Abide with Me" or "For All the Saints" or "Eternal Father Strong to Save" because I cannot stop my tears, I know that I am not far from the Kingdom. "When I was a child," poet Anne Porter begins,

I once sat sobbing on the floor
Beside my mother's piano
As she played and sang
For there was in her singing
A shy yet solemn glory
My smallness could not hold

And when I was asked
Why I was crying
I had no words for it
I only shook my head
And went on crying

Why is it that music
At its most beautiful
Opens a wound in us
An ache a desolation
Deep as a homesickness
For some far-off
And half-forgotten country
I've never understood
Why this is so

But there's an ancient legend
From the other side of the world
That gives away the secret
Of this mysterious sorrow

For centuries on centuries
We have been wandering
But we were made for Paradise
As deer for the forest

And when music comes to us
With its heavenly beauty
It brings desolation
For when we hear it
We half remember
That lost native country

We dimly remember the fields
Their fragrant windswept clover
The birdsongs in the orchards
The wild white violets in the moss
By the transparent streams

And shining at the heart of it
Is the longed-for beauty
Of the one who waits for us
Who will always wait for us
In those radiant meadows

Yet also came to live with us
And wanders where we wander.

Why sing? Finally because the longed-for beauty is the beauty of one who is a trio—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—in whose image we were made. That One is waiting for us, will always wait for us, in the Kingdom that is "the perfect harmony between the [singing] of the redeemed and the [singing] that God is. The end is music." [Robert Jensen] Soli Deo Gloria!