

I learned something new this week. I learned that it was customary for the Hebrews to celebrate God’s mighty acts by writing a new song. For example, when God led the children of Israel through the Red Sea and set them free from their slavery to the mighty Pharaoh, Moses wrote a song to commemorate the occasion. He said, *“I will sing to the LORD, for he is highly exalted. Both horse and driver he has hurled into the sea. The LORD is my strength and my defense; he has become my salvation...”* (Exodus 15:1-2).

When God answered Hannah’s prayer for a son, she also sang, *“My heart rejoices in the LORD; in the LORD my horn is lifted high. My mouth boasts over my enemies, for I delight in your deliverance...”* (1 Sam 2:1). And once David had prevailed over the Gibeonites, the Philistines, and all the other enemies of Israel, he sang, *“The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge...I called to the LORD, who is worthy of praise, and have been saved from my enemies”* (2 Samuel 22:2-4).

Whenever the Hebrews experienced the awesome power of God’s redeeming love, they sang a new song to mark the occasion. This is the backdrop of the 98th Psalm. It’s a song of praise commemorating the end of the Babylonian exile: *“Sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things; his right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him”* (Psalms 98:1).

The Israelites had lived in captivity for seventy years, and now they were free to return to the land of Judea. Can you imagine a better time for celebration? No wonder the psalmist went on to say, *“Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth, burst into jubilant song with music; make music to the LORD with the harp, with the harp and the sound of singing, with trumpets and the blast of the ram’s horn—shout for joy before the LORD, the King. Let the sea resound, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it”* (Psalms 98:4-7).

Martin Tel is the Director of Music at my alma mater, Princeton Seminary. Martin says, “There are three psalms that have long been associated with Christmas: Psalm 96, 97, and 98 (our Psalm for today). These psalms are handed to us as a set. Like bookends, Psalms 96 and 98 both begin with an exhortation to sing a new song to the Lord. All three psalms depict the cosmos bursting out in joyful song at the coming of the Lord. The coming king will judge with truth and righteousness. The three psalms are breathtaking and the connection to Christmas is natural. The confession of the early church was ‘Christ is King; Jesus is Lord.’ These psalms orient us to Jesus, both his coming to us and his righteous reign.”

Christmas is about the only time when the church family can agree on what we should sing and—it’s not the Psalms—it’s Christmas carols. We love the “time travel” carols that bring us back to Bethlehem to overhear angel choruses and to peek in on the manger scene. At Christmas, we are definitely focused on carols, not psalms.

Yet the Psalms can broaden our Christmas praise. They open us up to prophetic witness. They expand our language of prayer and praise. To quote John Calvin, writing in the preface to the French psalter of 1543, “...when we shall have moved all around to search here and there, we shall find no better nor more proper songs to do this than the Psalms of David, which the Holy Spirit has spoken and made through him. And thus, when we sing them, we are certain that God puts in our mouth the words, as if he himself were singing with us to exalt his glory.”

This morning I want us to do as the psalm writer does, “*Sing to the Lord a new song,*” with the hope that we can recognize God’s mighty acts in our world today and inspire us to sing a new song to the Lord every day of this new year. In many ways, the old Hebrew custom is familiar to us. We already commission a symphony or some other work of art to commemorate special occasions. It seems a fitting thing to do on those types of occasions.

And it doesn’t have to be a national celebration. Our dearly loved Director of Children’s Ministry, Lari Skowron stepped away from that position at year’s end, so on December 16, following the Children’s Christmas Program we took a moment to recognize her ministry with us for the last 12 years. Unbeknownst to her, Ken Parme wrote a wonderful poem expressing our love and gratitude to Lari. There was nary a dry eye in the house. This is the spirit of Psalm 98: “*Sing to the Lord a new song.*” Sing praise to God for all the many ways God has blessed us by sending us his love and continues to bless our lives today.

It’s easy to see God’s power and might in landmark events such as the Exodus, or the return of the Exiles, or the end of a war, the dedication of a building, or the inauguration of a new era. Yet, if we look closely, God is at work all around us, every day, giving us many more reasons to sing and celebrate.

Miracles happen every day. Once we’re aware of what God is doing in the world today reconciling us to himself; once we’re aware of what God is up to in our own life, transforming us into the man or woman God created us to be; once we become aware of the power of God’s redeeming love, we, too, will want to sing.

“*Sing to the Lord a new song.*” It sounds simple enough, and it is. But, just so we’re clear, let me say that new songs are not meant to displace all of the old songs. The point is not to swap one for the other, but to expand our repertoire and broaden our horizons. I’ve heard some people say, perhaps you have said it, that the best hymns are the hymns of the past, hymns like Amazing Grace, The Old Rugged Cross, Blessed Assurance, In the Garden. I grew up singing those hymns, and while they will always be near and dear to my heart, I’m convinced they’re not the only hymns we ought to sing. We do God a disservice when we limit our songs to those we’re personally familiar with.

Besides, even old songs are new songs to those who are hearing them for the first time. Take Beethoven’s 3rd Symphony, especially the climax, where two totally different chords clash, not once, but nine times in a dramatic display of polytonality. Back at the turn of the 19th Century, when it first premiered, many left the concert hall in protest. “Blasphemy!” they said. Others heard it and recognized Beethoven’s genius. Old songs are new songs to those who are hearing them for the very first time. Hymns we’ve sung for years can speak the message of God’s love to those who are new to the Christian faith.

When something new happens in the lives of those who sing, even old songs become new songs. For instance, when our hearts are filled with a new spirit of love or an expression of deepest gratitude, we’re able to sing with a newfound sense of conviction and joy, whether it’s an old song or a new song we happen to be singing. That is, indeed, what motivated the exiles to sing a new song to the Lord in Psalm 98. Verse 3 of Psalm 98 shows us the reason why they sang: Because “*He has remembered his love and his faithfulness to Israel.*” God demonstrated his *love* for his people by bringing them home again!

Love is a very common word in our culture. Amazon.com lists 10,300 book titles for “Money,” 18,800 for “God,” but 30,000 for “Love.” Love is one of our deepest human needs, yet it’s often misused. This love letter is an example:

Dearest Johnny,

No words could ever express the great unhappiness I’ve felt since breaking off our engagement. Please say you’ll take me back. No one could ever take your place in my heart, so please forgive me. I love you, I love you, I love you!

Yours Forever, Marie

P.S. And congratulations on winning the Mega Millions lottery!!!

Genuine love, however, is a powerful, biblical, redemptive reality. The Bible has much to say about love; the word occurs over 650 times. Scripture extols the transforming power of God’s love, how it can heal our broken dreams, our severed relationships or any of life’s biggest challenges.

It may never have occurred to you that the songs and hymns we sing in worship are a way of responding to the Christmas message of God’s redeeming love, his self-gift of Jesus. In the Christmas story we heard him say to us “I love you.” How are we to respond to that? Like the 98th Psalm, *Joy to the World*, *The First Noel*, and *Love Divine All Loves Excelling* are messages to God from us. Singing is one way of saying “I love you” to the God of our salvation.

Charles Wesley gave the world *a new song to sing* over 200 years ago when he wrote: “Love Divine, all loves excelling, Joy of heaven, to earth come down, fix in us thy humble dwelling, all thy faithful mercies crown. Jesus, thou art all compassion, pure, unbounded love thou art; visit us with thy salvation, enter every trembling heart.” When we sing, we are saying to God, “I love you.” Amen.