

“Learning to Sing God’s Song”
Stouffville United Church
Sunday, September 6, 2020

Psalm 149

While in these days of Covid-19 restrictions, we can’t sing together this morning. But while we gather as a community of faith, it is easy to think about the songs that we have sung together. The titles alone of favourite hymns instill in us a deep sense of gratitude and thankfulness. For these are hymns that have anchored us throughout our lives.

Jesus loves me this I know for the bible tells me so.
Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.
I come to the Garden alone while the dew is still on the roses.
On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross, the emblem of suffering and shame.

What these songs do is stir up in our souls our knowledge of how God is so very present in our lives – in our times of need, of searching, of grief, of surrender. So, when we come to today’s Psalm, we easily go with the opening lines – Sing to the Lord a New Song! Yes, we say – we can do this. We’ve done it all our lives! We’ve gathered as one to sing songs of faith in ways that lift and celebrate the presence of God in our lives and in the world!

Songs are powerful things. They can unite across culture, boundaries, and language. And songs can come in different forms. A song of climate crisis was born in the voice of Greta Thunberg. It found its first notes in her solitary Friday ‘climate’ strikes while at school in Sweden. Her song would carry her to North America and her song would be sung around the world.

There is currently a song of protest sung in this land. Chants of resistance, songs of protest, have been accompanied by violence, shouting, gun shots, burning buildings and cars. This song is not a new song but a recurring song – a song sung by each successive generation in North America who have in their history, in their blood, the memory of slavery, the memory of what has been away through the cultural genocide of the residential school system.

And the songs of protest continue loudly and prophetically under the banner “Black Lives Matter.” Slavery was a horrible abomination where centuries ago, people decided it was right to sell a person into slavery, to strip them of their identity, their culture, their family, their homeland. And in the United States, to declare in a Constitutional document that slaves were 3/5ths of a human. And while slavery was abolished in North America, the dynamic of white supremacist thinking is deeply embedded in existing patterns of behaviour, thinking, and education. The song of white supremacy and the song of Black Lives Matter is clashing with violent consequences.

And then, there is a song I will call Covid. A song that has brought new notes to our ear, notes of anxiety, fatigue, exhaustion, and death. This song is filled with references to rules and restrictions, economic fall out, our children and their schools, the vulnerable, the elderly, people

with compromised immune systems. This song has mothballed our songs in church; it has told choirs to go home. The Covid song is one of lament – for what we have lost to Covid – closeness to family and friends, loneliness, deep sea changes to our routines, loss of community.

But this morning, our spirits are lifted when we are asked to sing a new song to the Lord! Praise the Lord! Sing to the Lord a new song. ‘Sing praise in the assembly of the faithful’ we read in Psalm 149! Let Israel be glad in its Maker; let the children of Zion rejoice in their God. Let them praise God’s Name with dance; let them sing praise with timbrel and harp. (Psalm 149:1-3, The Inclusive Bible)

Psalm 149 is one of a set that close the Psalter. The last five psalms all begin and end with the line ‘Praise the Lord!’ They are joyful. They are filled with references to singing and musical instruments and dance. They are songs of praise! And as we read our psalm, we are swept up in the joyful worship. In Verse 5 we are exulting in glory, we are even singing the songs for joy on our couches! Sounds like how we spent our on-line worship services for so many months!

Then we read in Verse 6, Let the high praises of God be in their throats, and two-edged swords in their hands. OK we say. Then we read on, to execute vengeance on the nations and punishment on the peoples, to bind their kings with fetters and their nobles with chains of iron, to execute on them the judgement decreed. And we say, ‘Where did this all come from?’ We were all happy dancing and singing and playing our tambourines! And now a 2-edged sword? Vengeance? Punishment? Chains of iron?

A commentary points out that the psalmist was trying to prepare us for this abrupt change when he wrote in the end of verse 4 – For the Lord takes pleasure in his people; he adorns the humble with *victory*.” For it is the lowly, the meek, the humble that God seeks to lift up time and time again. When we think about it – these are key ‘notes’ in the song that God sings. They are the notes the prophets sang – think of Micah – “What does the Lord require of you but to do *justice*, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” (Micah 6:8) Think of what Amos said, ‘But let *justice* roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5:24) Think of the words from the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” (Mt 5:3, 6)

This song is found throughout the scriptures, rooted in Jesus lifting up those whom society and political structures marginalized, rooted in the prophets who sang of the need to change your ways. The notes of the song are not new. What *is* new is our understanding of the song.

A commentary suggests that Verse 9a, ‘to execute on them the judgement decreed,’ could be translated as, “to enact among them the *justice* that is written.” They continue, “the vocation of the faithful becomes the expression of praise *and* the enactment of justice. The two are inextricably bound together.” To sing to God a new song is one that “tells the old, old story” *and* goes hand in hand with ‘enacting the justice that is written.’¹ It is not enough to simply sing a

¹ Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 4, Pastoral Perspective, 226.

song of praise. We are called to sing a song of seeking justice as well. A song of love *and* justice is what the Lord requires from us. In other words, our song will turn upside down the power structures that discriminate based on who you are. In other words, the song we will sing will name racism when you see it. In other words, this song will use your voice when others don't have a voice. In other words, this song will seek justice where it is being withheld or denied. Yes, it's not enough to sing praises to God. God requires of you that you also sing about *justice*. Love and justice go hand in hand.

I want to close with a reflection I adapted from David Sharp.

I want to ask God today, "God, what would you have me sing?"

And God will say,

 "Today we will sing.

 You sing...

 I sing ...

 We sing.... together.

And watch the song unfold –

each note revealed,

and sung easily and joyfully,

even the difficult ones.²

Because we sing together.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

² Adapted from David Preston Sharp, *Power for Life: Inspirational Guidance for Daily Living* (Kelowna: Wood Lake Publishing Inc., 2019, 7.)