

Old and New Ways to Praise
Reflection on Psalm 149
Sunday January 31, 2010
Trinity United, Ottawa
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“Praise the Lord, sing to the Lord a new song.”

“Worship is sacred ritual intended to pry open the doors of our hearts to the Holy Spirit,” writes Bruce Sanguin in ‘The Emerging Church.’ “Music moves the soul and when a solo or hymn clicks with the theme of the service, magic happens.” Like most of us humbled preachers, Bruce recognizes that “long after people forget what the sermon was about, they’re still humming the music.” So he names “making a joyful noise unto God” with robust congregational singing as the crucial role of all our music ministries.

Isn’t it true that when we stand up and sing words that are true to us, in a tune that lifts us, our hearts are pried open to the Holy? We feel that Christ radiance, within and around us!

This morning, as we dedicate our new More Voices hymn book supplements - to the glory of God and the honour of our loved ones - we hear some of the ancient Psalms - there are six of them - enjoining us to “sing a new song to the Lord.” Yet, as we all know, introducing new songs doesn’t necessarily make for robust congregational singing - not at first. Many of us humans strain to sing something new. (You wouldn’t want to have been sitting next to me at Choir practice on Thursday!)

On Wednesday morning we looked at these six psalms, in both the New Revised Standard Version, and Peterson’s paraphrased modern Psalms in “The Message.” Interestingly, it was the youngest in our Circle who asked the question of the day: “**Why** do we need to sing **new** songs?” And it was the eldest of us who responded first: “Something unusual or wonderful happens in your life. Something different,”

she said, “and you think: I have to do something new in response to that.” Sing a new song to God.

God is always creating and guiding. Always energizing, healing, changing us with love. As we learn to look for and consciously absorb God’s active presence in our lives, we naturally respond with our own loving creativity. Not for God’s sake, but because we need to express ourselves.

That is one reason to sing a new hymn - to keep our relationship with God current - up-do-date with our lives. Like a plainspoken everyday prayer, a new hymn expressed in the style and language of now, can help us ‘stay real’ and feel more real in our sung conversations with the Holy.

Anticipating today’s smorgasbord of new hymns, we naturally took stock of why we love the old hymns, which, I trust we’ll never abandon here. Old and well known hymns, we all agreed, open our hearts with memories and give us comfort, familiar rhythms flow easily from us in congregational song... and they conjure up grandmothers’ presence. We need our old hymns.

But why was I was surprised to hear someone approaching 90 say this? “ Our old hymns are very sad though. They so often end up in death. The newer hymns are mostly joyful.”

And it was someone older than my mom who responded to my question about our favourite instruments: “I love drums the best!” she declared. “The rhythm. The energy and the beat get the old feet moving.”

Others described their favourite instruments: as cello “because its rhythm gets in your chest”, and oboe, for its “bittersweet cranky sounds.” The violin “because it can talk.... get right inside you and it can cry and be joyous and mysterious.” I love the organ full stops, because its resonance seems to just expand my chest like joy -

and the drums because their heartbeat moves mine to dance. And the guitar! - Well how many of us time travel along those six strings to our folk-singing youth? Guitars release a lot of social justice heart-songs.

Our More Voices hymn books invite some different instrumentations back into our 10:30 worship, to pry open more hearts, old and young, old and new. The different musical cultures represented between these covers stretch our appreciation of praise to other lands and to our immigrant communities. Learning to sing ‘their way’ helps us to learn to love “others.” It does takes some time and practise for us to comfortably cross musical cultures, but we manage it well here. Remember, way back in the ‘90s, when ‘Siyahumba’ was strange and new? Gayle wrote to me this week that they are singing it for the first time in her otherwise quite musically conservative church in Palm Springs. I think she is proud of us this time. Trinity has never been the church to be left behind the times!

The music in More Voices covers quite a spectrum of musics,. Its hymns are mostly, but not all ‘new to us’ - written as they are since 1990. Thus the lyrics reflect a theology that focusses on life rather than death. The imagery shows a God who doesn’t have to be a male, though she can be that too. We sing these songs with a sense of the Christ *within* as well as out there, and a Spirit who is in the air.

Some of us will immediately take up these new songs with gusto and others can ride the current of their singing, until we learn to swim along. May all of us appreciate the wisdom of the ancient psalmists, who sung out so often: “Sing a new song to the Lord! Make a joyful noise all the Earth!”

Let’s see if this new song will pry some hearts open, shall we? Ready to rock with God?

More Voices #26 Your Love Is Amazing - Hallelujah!