

Old Testament lesson: Psalm 98:1-6

New Testament lesson: Revelation 5:11-14

“Our passion can be expressed in many different ways. For some, it is through music. One passionate soul expressed it in graffiti, on a New York subway.

(Check this out):

You can punch my lips so I can't blow my horn, but my fingers will find a piano.

You can slam the piano lid on my fingers, but you can't stop my toes from tapping.

You can stomp on my foot to keep my toes from tapping, but my heart will keep on swinging in four/four time.

You can even stop my heart from ticking, but the music of the saints shall never cease.

That's from William Carter's article “Singing a New Song: The Gospel and Jazz,” in the Princeton Seminary Bulletin.¹

Today we dedicate our new Glory to God hymnals, with the assurance that “the music of the saints” shall not only never cease, but grow and evolve as God continues to work on us as a community of faith.

Your new hymnal retains 400 hymns from the blue hymnal, while adding another 400 from other hymnals, songbooks and individual composers. We get to sing our current hymns and some favorites brought back from the red hymnal, while also dipping into new hymns and songs of praise.

The Bible tells us, “... Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things.” The Psalmist is assuring us that this new hymnal and its new songs are part of our calling as a community of faith.

We are called to encounter and embrace all kinds of new things because God is continually creating and recreating new things. Or as the Psalmist says, God “... has done (is doing) marvelous things.” If we stop finding new ways of expressing ourselves in relation to God, we deny or overlook the fact that God is still active in our lives.

It's interesting to note that this Psalm we're looking at today is in a part of the Bible that gives voice to the pain and struggle of Babylonian captivity.² The Israelites were not singing about or celebrating happy times; they were responding to the worst that life could hand them. And still they sang praises to God.

When you're having the worst struggle of your life, do you feel like singing? I don't think so; who does? And yet, God calls us to sing out anyway, sing about God's

¹ Vol. XIX, No. 1, 1998, 46

² The New Interpreter's Bible. Vol. IV. Nashville: Abingdon, 1996, 1072.

faithfulness. And I mean actually, physically sing. It's a great way to move beyond your troubles to the blessings God has out ahead for you.

There is something about singing a hymn or praise song that works on us in unexpected ways. Just by going through the motions, moving your lips, the reality of the hymn comes to life in your heart. Well this makes sense. Singing to God is bound to have a positive effect on us.

When the Psalmist says, "Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things," there is no indication what marvelous things God has done. And yet, we know from the Bible it refers to God leading the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, prior to their Babylonian captivity.

The Psalmist is saying that, if you know God did great things for you earlier, you can count on God to help you now, even if you are feeling like your being held captive in Babylon. We know God is in charge and will guide all things toward the good, so we have every reason to sing to the Lord, come what may. Of course, having reason to sing to the Lord is only the first step. Then we have to have the courage to actually sign, which is easier for some than for others.

For me, singing is not easy. I can't sing – thank God for the choir and all of you folks. And I know I'm not alone here. How many others can't sing? Raise your hands; don't be shy. Now, how many of us sing anyway, at least here at church? Keep your hand up if that's you. Just a few of us. I understand; it's hard. Trust me; I can't sing. I had to push through that to actually begin singing in church. I sing hymns and praise songs at church because I really get something out of it. When I'm singing in church, I'm praying to God.

That's what hymns are, after all –prayers that we sing. It says so right here in our Book of Order: "Song is a response which engages the whole self in prayer. Song unites the faithful in common prayer whenever they gather for worship...." (W-2.1003)

I know that many people who don't sing in church are faithfully following along in their hearts. That's good. But there's just something about actually singing the hymns and praise songs – no matter how softly – that changes your heart, eases your burdens, and brings an overwhelming sense of joy.

I hope that everyone is getting a sense of God's presence during our hymns and praise songs. That's what it's all about – letting God work on you through worship. One of the reasons I'm able to sing hymns even though I can't sing is because of what it says in Psalm 98 – "... sing to the Lord; ... make a joyful noise to the Lord; ... sing praise to the Lord."

I know I can't sing to you or even to myself. It sounds awful. But I can sing to the Lord. I can sing to the Lord because everything we do or say or sing in the Spirit of Christ sounds, to the Lord, like heaven on earth. Try it during our sending hymn today. It's titled "Sing Praise to God Who Reigns Above." When we come to that later this morning, let's sing that hymn loud and proud, or soft and steady. Whatever works for you. I guarantee you it will change your heart.

This is your music, your prayer. It's here for you – here for us – to lift up to God. And it's here for God to listen to and bless.

If you'll allow, I want to share a rather humorous story about how the music of the church was not always entrusted to the people of the church. In the 18th century, a new operatic style of music was taking hold in churches. In the process, singing was taken away from the congregation and entrusted to those who had operatic voice, like our Music Director, David.

But in Leipzig, Germany, the Town Council wanted to have the people involved more, not less, in the musical life of the community. In 1722, they formed a search committee to hire a new choir director for Saint Thomas Church. They offered the position to their top candidate, who three weeks later, turned them down. So they contacted their second choice, who also turned them down.

Writing about this, one of the search-committee members said, "Since the best man could not be obtained, a mediocre one would have to be accepted." Their "mediocre" candidate was Johann Sebastian Bach.

Bach went on to compose music specifically for the congregation to sing, and I'm sure not all of them could sing. The point is, we sing in church, not because we sound good, but because sometimes it's the only way to fully express our love of God, trust in the Holy Spirit, and devotion to the teachings of Jesus Christ.

If your love of God, trust in the Holy Spirit, and devotion to the way of Christ is not all that it could be – and whose is? – then take it to the Lord in prayer, take it to the Lord in song. God answers prayer, and God smiles upon us when we join together in song and worship.

Our anthem today is probably the No. 1 favorite church hymn of all time, anywhere, "Amazing Grace." Even people who have never set foot in church love this hymn. It's one that we don't even have to sing for it to work on our hearts as a prayer of thanksgiving to God, because we've sung or heard it so many times and know the words so well, they're inside us.

In just a few moments, we are going to hear "Amazing Grace" performed on saxophone by Brett Barger. Brett is the grandson of Mary and Jerry Havenhill, who donated the hymnals.

As we listen to "Amazing Grace," I know you will feel it working on you, even without the lyrics being sung. That same feeling is available to you through all the hymns and songs we sing, particularly when you sing along and let those words and melody sink in. I encourage you to join me in the coming weeks as together we strive to recapture that feeling through the hymns and songs we sing – some new, some old favorites, and many, many hymns that you know and love. Brett, take us to the Lord in prayer, in your musical offering.

Pastoral Prayer

Holy God, we continue to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ this Second Sunday of Eastertime. Our joy and our song goes on in celebration that Christ is alive and that we are transformed in the faith.

We rejoice that because he was raised to new life, we also experience new and resurrected lives. Each of our staff – and all your servants here, O God – are gifted in ministry through the church, in the community and among our families. Thanks you for bringing these gifts to life in us and through us.

Help us to see what holds us back, and to look past our self-made limitations to the promises of life as your faithful – and courageous – servants.

For those whose fears and anxieties have kept them captive, we pray through your Spirit of liberation that they be set free.

For those dealing with illness and disease, we pray your Spirit of healing, health and wholeness. We pray those we hold in our hearts this day.

For you assured, O Lord, that whatever we ask for in your name, the Father God will grant. Make it so, Jesus, as we join our voices in prayer now, using the words that you taught to pray, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts, as we forgive
our debtors;
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For thine is the Kingdom, and the Power, and the Glory, forever. Amen.**