

“O Sing to God”

May 5, 2024 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

Rev. Daniel A. Smith

Texts: Psalm 96

Those of you who have been in my office may recognize this colorful artwork here on our table. It was a gift from a member of the last church I served in Lexington, a hand-me-down really, since she was downsizing from her house to an apartment. It features a large, color-filled treble clef with Hebrew writing surrounding the bottom that reads - שִׁירוּ לַיהוָה שִׁיר חֲדָשׁ. *Shiru l'adonai shir chadash*. Sing to God a new song!

This is my third to last sermon at First Church and when I saw Psalm 96 in the lectionary I knew what I wanted to do. I knew I wanted to take some time to ponder with you the power of what we get to do here week after week, of what it means and what it has meant to me, to sing to God. Week after week, we come here, and we get to sing! I know for some of you, this is why you come, and it's why you come here to First Church! For others, it bears lifting up for how often we assume if not take for granted this great privilege we share. We sing and hear old songs, and sometimes really old songs, like Psalm 96. After all, the psalms are essentially a hymnbook of the bible, each is set to be sung, often antiphonally, in ancient Jewish worship. We also sing and hear new songs. Sometimes these are old songs that become new each time we sing them because no one has ever heard them sung the same way before. Occasionally, we hear a truly new song, like a wondrous premiere by our exceedingly gifted staff composer, Patty Van Ness.

There's actually a fascinating article in the New York Times this week that asks the question: “What is a song?” Among other things, the article references a case in the courts last year about whether contemporary singer-songwriter Ed Sheeran infringed on copyright by singing what he thought was a new song but that sounded a lot like an old song, specifically Marvin's Gaye's classic “Let's Get It On.” The notes on the page were similar enough to go to court over it but the sound of the performance was different enough that Sheeran won the case. At the heart of the matter are almost philosophical questions about what makes a song a song. Is it the notes on the page, or does it become new in the performance?

Part of why I felt so called to address this today is because I've grown mindful over the years of how deeply I've come to value and treasure our singing together, and how this place does it better than any I've been part of! There's a powerful living question here, it's implicit in our Psalm for today: what is a song? And what constitutes that fundamental tear-jerking, soul-soaring power of the songs we get to sing here, that often stay with us - stay with me at least, throughout the week, beautifully, movingly lodged in my mind, soul and throat, often until we come together to sing a new song, and the cycle repeats? How many of you are with me here - waking up with a tune and/or words we've sung here together on Sunday on Monday, Tuesday and throughout the whole week? Far from an ear worm it's a profound gift, week after week, and I've come to rely on it and take spiritual nourishment, not only in the moment itself but in it's remarkable staying power. What is that?

Yes, it's that guy over there at the organ, Peter Sykes. To be honest, Peter is part of the reason I wanted to preach about music today, you see I had a dream about him a few weeks ago. I haven't told him about

this yet and to be honest I don't recall the specifics, but we were both here and I recall the feeling of utter gratitude and wanting to be sure he and you all knew how grateful I was, and I know so many of us are, for the remarkable gift of an offering a soundtrack for my days, weeks and life these past 20 years. What's more, my 24-year-old son Julian was home at the time of my dream. I mentioned it to him, and he said, no joke, “that's so weird. I had a dream about Peter, too, recently.” This shocked me. Julian comes to church maybe once or twice a year these days. He couldn't remember specifics either, said he had no idea why, but it must have something to do with my leaving. See what effect you have man, even our collective subconscious, even across generations, and across the country!

Peter told us at staff meeting this week that Wednesday, May 1st marked his 38th anniversary here. Can we celebrate that? 38 years at that console! I figure I've led at least 1000 services here, including weddings, memorials services and special services. He's easily led close to 2000, probably accompanying as many 10,000 hymns! And from there, let's not even try to extrapolate the number of stops you've pulled out, or more deeply the number of tears you've drawn out of us by the way you accompanied our hymns and our very hearts. From console to consolation! From playing to accompany to playing with deeply felt compassion that finds us and meets us right where we are. I thank you, Peter, from the bottom of my heart! We thank you!

And to be sure, some of same can be said about our one-time Jazz 5:30 pianist Carolyn Wilkins and more recently Issa Bibbins and his family and guests, who have similarly brought us, through music, into actual contact with the deep resources of our faith, joy and love! So much more than words, we come here week after week to connect with resource, to nourish ourselves with beauty, hope and joy, to restore a timeless faith that music carries unlike anything else.

And more than just about anything else, after just a few more weeks, 5 after today, I will so dearly miss the weekly gift and grace of being able to sing with you all. Whether belting out Christmas Carols, singing those soaring Easter hymns, the Hallelujah Chorus with Robinson Pyle on trumpet and Peter at the Frobenius, this exquisite manifestation of “the great machine,” as organs were once called. I lift this up because amidst all our sad leave-takings, you don't need to say goodbye to this great gift! And neither do I, really. For I and others can take these hymns with us. They can continue to be resources for us long after we leave. It may be a little strange, but I regularly have the thought that if ever I were stranded on a desert island, or otherwise left with nothing, for days, weeks or month on end, I think I'd be ok! I think I could pretty much survive, as if on hymns alone, letting them restore me to a grateful and faith-filled posture, recalling them, writing them in the sand, and singing them to the trees!

You see...hymns aren't just any songs. “Hymn” from the Latin “hymnus” means a song of praise to a god or heroes! Psalms and hymns put words and tunes inside our bodies that course through us, and become genuine offerings, praises that we can lift up together and that have a unique power to —are intended to, really —connect us to something larger, something deeply within and beyond ourselves, something eternal! They also invite us to imagine the great chorus of all the saints who have sung and created and accompanied these songs through the ages, spiritual ancestors in these very pews, ancestral organists even, breathing in and out much the same air we breathe now, the same Spirit, a great and grand chorus of all kinds of people, all shapes and races, sharing together in this wonderfully freeing and feeling activity. And it frees us in part because it is free to us! So long as the musicians are well paid, these songs do nothing to exploit or extract, and they reach beyond themselves, whether in lamentation or joy or hope. What an astonishing gift!

As some of you know, the preacher gets to choose hymns each Sunday. It's in consultation with staff at our weekly meetings but we bring the suggestions. Today's aren't necessarily my favorites but as you've probably noticed they fit the theme of the service. On Mondays or Tuesdays, I land on a scripture and then I get to scour the hymn book to find words or tunes to match the vibe. I love this part of my job. Some of my favorites? Of course, Kate and Peter's Come All You Thirsty and Come and Taste of Resurrection, also By Gracious Powers, The Lone Wild Bird, Psalm 23 and 148. These and others would be on my desert Island playlist. Having sung them with you so lustily here, on Sundays, and then on Mondays in the shower, or when I'm walking somewhere, or pouring my morning coffee, I know many by heart! They lead and guide and meet me wherever I am and slow down or lift up my full days. Again, who's with me here? For the gift of the steady companionship of these songs of praise I can't say or sing thank you enough!

More broadly, our world and our lives and our souls are always needing a new song.... Students on campuses right now are finding and singing a new/old song of protest! And we pray that administrators find a way to sing, however antiphonally, with them so as to create a both/and way to honor freedom and diversity of expression, while engaging the powers that be in the struggle for justice and peace, while honoring genuine needs of and responsibilities to the wider public. Our nation needs a new song, too, maybe also an antiphonal one for the time being, that we might find common purpose and shift from shouting at each other across the aisles to singing with each other in them. Imagine that! Maybe it's the new song that Emma brought us during Lent. The Way Knows the Way! And y'all are in for a treat next year. In case you haven't noticed, in addition to her many other talents and super powers, she's a professional song leader and has a boatload of songs at the ready to match any moment!

And now let me end with this! First Church, I believe God already has a new song in mind for you all. Whether it's Peter, or Issa, or Emma or Sarah or a new minister or new members who help you catch the tune, I know you will! And I know my life and yours will continue to flow on in endless song, above earth's lamentation. Can we catch the sweet, though far-off hymn even now, that hails a new creation? We'll be singing this one at the close of the service and it is one of my favs! Through all the tumult and the strife, let's keep hearing that music ringing. Let's keep letting it find an echo in our souls. Let's keep singing a new song to God! For how, how can we keep from singing? Amen!