

When We Sing

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On a missionary tour to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ, Paul and Silas are in the European city of Philippi. They have encountered a slave girl possessed by a demon and used by her owners to make money telling fortunes. The girl follows them around, shouting about them, interrupting their preaching. The text says, Paul gets annoyed by her, and, in the name of Jesus Christ, he orders the demon to come out of her. Now healed, she ceases to make money for her owners in the fortune telling business, so Paul and Silas are beaten and thrown in jail for disturbing the peace. The story picks up here from the Acts of the Apostles:

The Acts of the Apostles 16:25-34

²⁵About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken;

and immediately all the doors were opened and everyone's chains were unfastened. ²⁷When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸But Paul shouted in a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." ²⁹The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰Then he brought them outside and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" ³¹They answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." ³²They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. ³³At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. ³⁴He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

Colossians 1:15-20

¹⁵He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; ¹⁶for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. ¹⁹For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

“I dread when Christmas is over,” someone visiting from out of town said to me on Christmas Eve – which to me felt like a premature sense of foreboding, but I also understand the feeling. In both of our scripture readings, from Paul’s Letter to the Colossians and the story of Paul and Silas in The Acts of the Apostles, we find people who are caught up not in the recent celebration of Christmas but caught up in Jesus Christ. In the wisdom of the church, the Christmas season lasts only twelve days. By the time we get to Epiphany the light that shone on the manger in Bethlehem becomes a light focused on Jesus Christ and on those who follow him.

The late chaplain at Harvard, Peter Gomes took on our sentimental affection for all things Christmas quite bluntly - saying, “Remember the context of Jesus’ birth, that occurred in a world where taxes were - and are - still collected, innocent children were - and are - still slaughtered, shepherds still have to work for a living, and the heavenly host of angels and the earthly Magi all go back to where they came from. A New Year forces us to leave the nostalgia of baby Jesus behind us, Gomes concludes: “It is not sufficient to say we believe in Christmas, whatever that means. It is imperative for Christians to say that we believe in Christ, and that that belief makes a difference in our lives.”¹

So, on this First Sunday after Epiphany, for those of us who love Christmas, even with Professor Gomes’ astute and unsentimental dose of reality, here’s some good news. There is something we treasure about the deep and resonant wonder of Christmas that does not go away, but rather carries us forward. It’s the singing. The Christmas Eve “Silent Night” candles are packed up and stored away for another year, but show up any Sunday, and we’ll be singing. Those “Angels We Have Heard on High” have receded back into the heavens again, but show up here any time of the year and we’ll be singing. Even at home, the

¹ Peter Gomes, United with Christ, Pulpit Digest, October-December, 2000.

Christmas tree may be bare but the hymns about the new life Jesus brings will echo even there. Music was, and is, and ever will be what accompanies the Christian life.

As a matter of fact, the Apostle Paul, arguably the most significant herald of the gospel of Jesus Christ, never sang a Christmas carol, but his faith and faithfulness was encouraged by the hymns he sang. The gospel accounts of the birth of Jesus were written down decades after the Apostle Paul started preaching and writing his letters. Paul doesn't think about baby Jesus. Paul sees Jesus as the full expression of God – whose life, death and resurrection empowers the living of our days.

Still, one of the ways Paul communicates hope in the gospel of Christ is through singing! I don't know if you noticed this, but our first reading from the Letter to the Colossians is actually the text of an early Christian hymn. Trying to help the early church understand that Jesus is God's Son, and not just a good person, Paul sings: *He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and earth were created... whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers...* It sounds like a hymn, doesn't it? and, two chapters later in this same letter, Paul will say: *Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts... Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.*²

Paul is in prison when he writes those words. It is from prison that Paul tries to straighten out some fundamental confusions in the early church about the nature of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the Son of God. He entered human existence to the point of death. By his resurrection the powers of this world lose their significance to the power of God. Therefore we will not fear. We will sing! And when we sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, God empowers us. Our hymns will fuel our

² Colossians 3:15-16

mission to counter the worldly powers of greed and oppression and injustice with acts of mercy, peace, and justice. When we sing, we declare that we are reconciled – to use one of Paul’s favorite words – we are reconciled to God and to one another.

The story about Paul and Silas from the Acts of the Apostles makes this compelling connection between the mission of the church and its music. This is a story about faithful disciples who have a bold sense of mission, and awkward, fallible motives. It is about the hard challenge of conveying God’s love amid a culture that values retribution over reconciliation and seeks to have peace without advocating for justice. While the details of this story may seem a bit archaic, a slave-girl with apparent mental illness being used to make money; and a jail located in someone’s home - when you delve into what these details represent – abuses of power, oppression of the weak, acquiescence to the status quo over justice – this story is quite relevant to our world today. It is a story about the work of the church in a broken and fearful world, and how the music of our worship encourages the messy, painful, redemptive work of ushering in the kingdom of God.

One of the fascinating things about this story to me is that Paul does not have some high, holy motive for healing the slave girl, which sets this whole amazing drama in motion. Paul has been traveling his known world on a mission with urgency to share the life-giving love of God revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. Paul’s stop in Philippi gets interrupted, however, and maybe weary with travel fatigue he basically loses it. While the demon-possessed child follows Paul and the apostles around shouting that they are slaves to the Most High God, Paul does not heal her at first. He just keeps preaching above the fray. But she keeps up the yelling *for many days*. What a curiosity that the Bible remembers it this way: *Paul, very much annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, “I order you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her!”* Paul finally healed the girl - not for her sake, but for his own so she would stop interrupting him.

What a gift that sometimes God can use our worst moments and irritating outbursts for good, that God can take - our self-centered motives, and help us rise above our humanity for divine purposes. Singing helps us do that.

Paul and Silas get into trouble for healing the girl because her special kind of possession enabled her to earn money for those exploiting her. So, they drag them into the town square and say to the rulers, "These men are foreigners who are disturbing our city by healing people we need to be kept sick." The crowd beats them up, and hands them over to the jailer who puts their feet in shackles. "About midnight - Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them... Suddenly the earth heaves, the prison shakes, the doors fly open, and everyone's chains fall off. Knowing what happens to jailers who permit their prisoners escape, the jailer draws his sword and prepares to kill himself. Paul shouts: "Don't harm yourself, we are all here, just singing hymns to God." The jailer asks: "What can I do to be saved?" In a word: "What do I need to be free?" Then he and his entire family learn about God's love, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and they are baptized to the tune of great rejoicing.

Friends, when we sing our hymns to God we transcend our individual selves and self-interests. When we sing our hymns to God we are united by the presence of God in our midst; when we sing we are empowered to do the work of Jesus Christ.

Donyelle McCray is a scholar of African American preaching and Professor of Homiletics at Yale Divinity School. She writes, "Song is the soul's mother tongue and favored mode of expression. Somehow our convictions and longings surface and deep truths that hover at the edge of consciousness seep out. Usually only the simplest words are nimble enough to initiate the flow of music. Whatever the mysterious workings, what is clear is we are creatures of adoration. Song serves as a crucial way of knowing God and ourselves as a conduit of divine energy." McCray goes on to say, "Hidden dimensions of God's joy become

available to us when we sing, and the Lord's presence feels more palpable.”

She illustrates her point by recalling what we all remember about the Civil Rights Movement: “When we’ve lost our way or feel pummeled by despair, the Spirit soothes us, even emboldens us through song. This happened so often for Bernice Johnson Reagon during the Civil Rights era that she described the protests in South Georgia, as a *singing movement*. Singing ‘This May Be the Last Time’ steeled protestors before demonstrations and singing ‘We Shall Overcome’ and ‘This Little Light of Mine’ stirred them during marches and in the aftermath as they sat in hot jail cells. A fitting song would rise in one person’s heart and soon the whole group would be borne up by its power.”³

That power is one of the great blessings of corporate worship. We have grown to treasure it in the quiet depths of our hearts during Christmas worship. But when Christmas-tide has come and gone, in twelve short days – the most fleeting season of the year, the candlelight singing that inspires us then to awe and wonder grows as the year unfolds. The light that once shone upon the manger shines upon us now. When we sing, we are emboldened, we are empowered, we are encouraged, and – like Paul and Silas and even the Jailer, we are freed. We are freed to do the work of God for the reconciliation of the world. It happens when we sing psalms, and hymns and spiritual songs to God. It happens whenever together we sing.

AMEN.

³ Donyell C. McCray, with Tom Long, *A surprising God: Advent Devotions for an Uncertain Time*, P. 40.