

**Dare to Imagine God's Song: A Sermon Preached by Laurel Fretz
at Bloomingdale Mennonite Church, December 12th, 2021**

Today is the third Sunday in Advent which traditionally is the Sunday of Joy or Gaudete, Latin for "rejoice" which is a very appropriate time to be talking about imagining God in song. This sermon is also serving as my final project in my Christian Hymn class. All the sources I have referenced will be noted in the copy emailed out to everyone, but I won't mention the sources as I am speaking (because that would not be fun for anyone). For guides along this musical journey, I will turn to Michael O'Connor and his article, "The Singing of Jesus" and well as Ephraim Radner's writing on "Being God's Song". We will look at the place of song in the Bible and the place of singing in Jesus' life and ministry and why it is important to remember why we sing.

There are many references to song in the Bible, some of which we have heard as part of our Scripture this morning. "Sing, O Daughter of Zion; shout aloud, O Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, O Daughter of Jerusalem!" (Zeph. 3:14). Singing appears almost twenty times in Isaiah, including the verses read for us today.¹ Music makes its first biblical appearance in Genesis 4 when Jubal who was a descendent of Cain is described as "the father of all who play the harp and flute." (Gen 4:21). From the earliest Scriptures, we have music, a gift from God. Christians have always seen music as divine in origin.² For Mennonites, obviously music and hymn singing is quite important. Have you any thoughts about why singing is important?

¹ Ephraim Radner, "Being God's Song: Venite, Exultemus Domino," In *Come, Let Us Sing to the Lord*, ed. Katherine Kennedy Steiner (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2017), 3.

² Radner, "Being God's Song," 3

There was a quote that I read in the very first reading for my class that was a huge lightbulb moment for me. I'm going to share it with you and maybe we can talk a bit more about it during worship response.

"It is the hymns, repeated over and over again, which form the container of much of our faith. They are probably in our age the only confessional documents, which we learn by heart. As such, they have taken the place of our catechisms."³

I do think for Mennonites, especially, that the hymns do form the container of our faith. We don't memorize catechisms the way Lutherans do or memorize prayers and ritual liturgy the way Roman Catholics and Anglicans do but we do sing, a lot! And we pass on our faith to succeeding generations through song. But what of the Biblical songs of creation and God's people who sang before us? When does Jesus sing?

There are many examples in Isaiah and of course Psalms of creation singing. Meadows, hills, birds, trees, "even the seas, the very heavens and depths of the earth make a song to their Lord...the very act of creation is one upheld by singing."⁴ Isn't that such a joyful image? Creation is upheld, glorified in song. If "all the trees of the forest too will shout out joyfully before the Lord because he is coming," then surely, we can also sing with joy. (Ps. 96: 12). Moses and Miriam sang to God after Israel's deliverance from Egypt (Ex 15). God says to Job, "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations? Who laid its cornerstone, while the morning stars sang in unison and all the divine beings shouted?" (Job 38: 4-7). Songs of praise

³ Albert van den Heuvel quoted in Michael C. Hawn, *New Songs of Celebration Render* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2013), XXVI.

⁴ Radner, "Being God's Song," 4.

are part of creation itself. "Music precedes not just human speech, but even the creation of human beings."⁵ If music was part of creation right from the very beginning, right from the appearance of the morning stars, then surely it behooves us to raise a song of praise to God. And if stars and trees and all divine beings sang then surely Jesus sang too.

As we journey through this season of Advent toward the Incarnation, let us remember the humanness of the people involved in the wondrous and holy event and that as praying people, they would have likely been singing people too. "For most religions, for most of the time...singing has been seen not as a decoration or an add-on to the 'real prayer' but as something which can be prayer itself."⁶ I think of Mary, a young woman, giving birth to her first baby, who is also the Messiah, in a barn. Mary and Joseph, first-time parents, with a new baby in a cold, dark stable. Can't you picture them singing to Jesus? A song and a prayer for the safe arrival of the baby, a lullaby to calm a crying Jesus, a song of thanksgiving and praise raised to God, these are all within the realm of possibility. Afterall, these are human people who experienced a human event not just divine actors in a holy story.

I think we can safely say that Jesus was sung to, but what of his own singing. "Like any other child, Jesus would have experienced singing and chanting in the home and at play. And like any other faithful Jew, he would have experienced singing in public worship."⁷ The one story we have in Scripture of Jesus' childhood is the story in Luke of 12-year-old Jesus at the temple at Passover, listening and questioning the temple teachers. (Lk 2:41-50) Surely, there

⁵ Radner, "Being God's Song," 4.

⁶ Michael O'Connor, "The Singing of Jesus," In *Resonant Witness: Conversations between Music and Theology*, eds. Jeremy S. Begbie and Steven R. Guthrie (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 434.

⁷ O'Connor, "Being God's Song," 435.

would have been singing. O'Connor writes that Jesus' frequent experience of organized prayer would likely not have been musical in a way that we understand music in Western terms but would be more closely understood as the "patterned intonation" of street vendors, sports announcers, or rappers.⁸ I, personally, love to think Jesus as a rapper. This form of stylized speech/song is also seen in the New Testament canticles, Mary's Magnificat and the songs of Zechariah and Simeon. The New Testament often uses the words, "to say" when what is meant is this kind of speech/song.⁹ In the 2 non-digital Bibles I use most frequently at home, the verses of Luke that tells of Mary's Magnificat are subtitled, Mary's Song and Mary praises God. However, the text itself reads, "Mary **said**, my soul glorifies the Lord," (Lk 1:46). We see this double meaning of the word 'say'. It means to say but it also implies a kind of song. The clearest example we have of Jesus singing during his earthly life is on the cross. In the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, Jesus cries out with the words of the Psalmist.¹⁰ It is a musical moan, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Ps 22:1). Again, not song as we understand it now, but clearly more than merely speech.

We know that Jesus taught his followers to pray. "He prayed with them, and he sang with them. They evidently continued this practice among themselves after the ascension".¹¹ Luke tells us that at the Ascension, the disciples worshipped him with great joy and stayed at the temple, praising God. (Lk 24: 52) And here we are all still praising God and rejoicing together in song. Similarly, at the end of the Gospel according to Matthew, Jesus says that he is

⁸ O'Connor, "Singing of Jesus" 436.

⁹ O'Connor, "Singing of Jesus," 436.

¹⁰ O'Connor, "Singing of Jesus," 439

¹¹ O'Connor, "Singing of Jesus," 441.

with us always to the very end of the age. (Mat. 28:20) So Jesus is still with us, here among us, singing with us as we worship.

Clement, one of the early Church fathers, wrote that, “Christ plays the instrument of creation (especially the human part of it); Christ sings the true song; and Christ himself is the new song (played by the father)”.¹² So Jesus links the song that creation sings and the songs that we, as the human Church, sing while also being THE song given to us by God.¹³ It is no wonder then that Advent and the Incarnation (Christmas) have the best songs. If our song is not created by us but given to us by God and translated to earthly language by Jesus at his birth through the Incarnation, then it absolutely makes sense that some of the most joyful and jubilant songs come at this time of the year.

And so, we turn to our other scripture for today from Philippians 4:4-7.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.

Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.

Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

The words joy or rejoice appear every few paragraphs in the letter to the Philippians, so quite appropriate for today. This ongoing season of pandemic has been difficult for many. For

¹² O’Connor, “Singing of Jesus,” 450.

¹³ O’Connor, Singing of Jesus “,” 453.

me personally and I know for many of you too, singing is something that brings great joy. Singing together in church during Advent as we await the coming of Jesus is cause for rejoicing. Knowing that Jesus sang when he was on earth and knowing that he is still singing with us is also cause for great celebration. Thinking about the angels that will descend and sing their good news of great joy to the Shepherds and to all of us is cause for rejoicing. Thinking about Mary singing to baby Jesus gives me chills. And thinking about joining the chorus of creation and all of God's singing people who came before us is a joyful thought indeed.