
Let All the World in Every Corner Sing

Psalm 96

A sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on December 24, 2016,
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This is probably the longest sermon title I have ever had but I can assure you that it is not a foreshadowing of a long sermon. The sermon title is taken from a 17th century George Herbert poem. “Let all the world in ev’ry corner sing, My God and King...” It’s a long sermon title signifying the long history of the story of the birth of a baby born in Bethlehem. It is an old story but it’s new every year, requiring a new song, a new sermon, a new message, something for today, for now, for where we find ourselves in the world. Do you hear what I hear?

Just this past week, four high profile violent attacks in two days, resulting in the loss of lives—in Jordan, Yemen, Germany, and Turkey. This doesn’t even include the Coptic church bombing in Cairo or the crisis in Aleppo, Syria or even what happens on our streets in America. Yet, Christmas, with its carols, comes again, ready or not. It always comes for we need the reminder that Jesus was born in tense times under the threat of a devious and jealous King Herod. Jesus doesn’t avoid the tough circumstances of life. He comes to the world as it is. Regardless of what’s happening in the world, Jesus comes, so above the earth’s lamentation, there is still a celebration at his incarnation as the angel and multitude of heavenly hosts, praise God and sing, “Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” There is a “sweet, though far-off hymn that hails a new creation” at his birth, and that heavenly music comes near to us today. Do you hear what I hear?

Music is so much a part of our lives. It’s ubiquitous; it’s the air we breathe, not just at concert halls, or on the radio or TV, or in films, but at airports, train stations, on elevators, in doctor’s offices, in a dentist chair, at hairdressers, in shopping malls. The commercial industry knows that music can affect how long people shop, the amount of money they spend, the product they buy. DJs alter energy levels at parties through music; restaurants shift the ambience of a space with music. Music is everywhere, even here today.

Speaking about music—what it is and what it does—is, as one person describes, like “dancing about architecture” (Elvis Costello). It’s difficult. When talking about the musical experience, our language has limits. The Russian virtuoso pianist, Evgeny Kissin, was interviewed and asked, “How do you choose your encores?” He said, “They come to me.” “How do you judge an audience?” “I feel something in the air.” “How do you decide when you are ready for a piece?” “This is always very clear to me.” (Don’t you just love musicians?!)

It’s hard to capture our relationship to music in words, even in the church. Someone may ask, “Why do you sing?” and we could well respond, “That’s what we do in the church on Sundays or at other times...It’s Christmas time so we binge on carols. It’s just what we do.” But why do we sing? Why should we sing? Maybe it’s deeper than what appears on the surface.

Right from the beginning, at three different times, Psalm 96, like many other Psalms, tells us to “sing to the Lord.” It’s a command, not a timid question— “Would you like to sing to the Lord?” The early church sang the Psalms as hymns and the Psalter was considered a Christian hymnbook. The Psalms not only exhort us to sing but they themselves are poetic forms of songs. But this isn’t surprising when all throughout the Old and New Testaments there are hymn fragments or song segments. From Genesis to Revelation, singing pervades the life of faith so much so that one scholar notes that roughly three quarters of the Bible verses on music in the Old Testament refer to song (Jeremy Begbie) and another person exclaims that “The Christian Church was born in song” (Ralph Martin). It’s not a coincidence that we sing a lot during Advent and Christmas—the birth of Christ gives birth to song in our lives. From plainsong to Bach cantatas to spirituals to the praise music industry to the Eastern Orthodox Church singing the entire Divine Liturgy, the church sings as a way of life.

“Nothing found in human life is omitted” in the Psalms, joys or sorrows, yet they still call us to sing. (Athanasius). They are true and honest expressions of human life before God and one key way to be before God is as a singer. I may be biased as the so-called “singing Dean” but Psalm 96 calls us to sing, even if you don’t feel like it. Singing to God is not a choice; it is a calling, a call to join the company of angels in their vocation; it’s an invitation to inhabit a universal vocation. It is something more than “that’s just what we do in church.”

Literary critic George Steiner puts his finger on it. For him, “Music and the metaphysical... [are] virtually inseparable. It is in and through music that we are most immediately in the presence of the logically, of the verbally inexpressible but wholly palpable energy in being that communicates to our senses and to our reflection what little we can grasp of the naked wonder of life... It has long been, it continues to be, the unwritten theology of those who lack or reject any formal creed.” Music as unwritten theology. Jesus didn’t come to give us a creed anyway; Jesus came to give us life, salvation, and a new song of hope that will never end for he is our undying song, the incarnate hymn of God in the world. The ancients—from Pythagoras to Plato to Augustine and Boethius to the cultures of Egypt, India, and China—taught that musical harmony was a metaphor for the cosmic order. They taught that the world was composed of music and that the gods sang and played the universe into existence. Well, surrounding the narrative of the birth of Jesus—Zechariah sings, Mary sings, the angels sing, Simeon sings—there’s a musical setting that can’t be ignored. Even in an epistle to the church at Philippi, the journey of God from divinity to humanity is clothed in music as that story is told through a hymn (Phil 2). That the incarnation of God in Christ was clothed in a hymn fragment suggests that when we speak of him, we should sing of him. In other words, as my Divinity colleague Jeremy Begbie writes, we are “cradled in God’s *harmonia*.” The One in the cradle, cradles us in the eternal symphony of God. Do you hear what I hear?

Our musicality, our singing, not only leads us back to when the Christ hymn enfleshed in Bethlehem but signifies the presence of Jesus in the midst of our singing. It is no wonder that the angels and multitude of hosts sang when Christ was born for God, Emmanuel, was with them. And when God is with you, melody is an appropriate, loving, intimate ministry.

The musical beat of God is everywhere. Our very own heartbeats and rhythmic bodily movements are in tempo with the pulse of God breathing in us. Our musicality and singing are creaturely activities

harmonizing us with God. There's so much disharmony in the world that our singing to the Lord is one way to stay in tune with God amid the cacophonous craziness. Reformer Martin Luther believed in the power of music and believed that "next to the Word of God, music deserve[d] the highest praise." Luther knew that music was deeper than a perfunctory practice in church and possessed power even in times of dread.

To sing praise to God when everything around is so full of pain and panic seems ludicrous and a cover up of reality. Yet, singing reveals reality which is why the angelic hosts sing of the glory of God at the birth of Christ. Music is not inconsequential though it may seem insignificant and ignorant in the face of serious world crises. But it is at such serious times that singing is critical. When the crisis comes, when a baby is born in uncertain times, when the Herods of the world want to destroy children, when society may ridicule Mary because she's a virgin but giving birth to the Messiah, when God enters the world as a human contrary to what was expected, when people have been enslaved, when others endure the threat of a Nazi regime, *then* it is time to sing and a song is born. When life may be the harshest—not when chestnuts are roasting on an open fire but when the world is on fire—the gift of song rises from the ashes. Totalitarian regimes banned music at times because of fear of its sociopolitical power. There's so much power in music that philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein noted that "the slow movement of Brahms' Third Quartet pulled him back from the brink of suicide." The singer Sting said that music saved his life and his sanity.

It is true, however, (and I say this as someone with a music background) that at times musicians and music may make you insane. After a worship service, a little boy reached into his pocket and pulled out some money and approached the choir director up front. The choir director asked the boy, "Why are you giving me money?" The boy responded in blunt honesty, "My dad said you were one of the poorest choirs he's ever heard." Music in the church can drive us crazy but what is crucial is not really the quality of the singing but the fact that one sings and engages in one's creaturely nature with all of creation in every corner.

The angels and a multitude of the heavenly host praise God when Jesus is found wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger. They experience the gift of God for the world and respond accordingly in song. Do you hear what I hear?

Response to God's wondrous work is musical. When Christ comes, a new king is born, a new reign is in order. His descent is an ascent that lifts our voices to enthrone him. Psalm 96 is an enthronement psalm (cf. Ps 93, 95-99, Ps 29, 47), addressing God as "king" and proclaiming God's reign, which is the central affirmation of the entire book of Psalms—the Lord reigns (James May). Isn't that the message of Christmas? It may not really look like it these days, but the Lord reigns. A king comes in crazy times. Psalm 96 is actually voiced in Babylonian exile. Yet what rings out trumpet-tongued?

O sing to the Lord a new song;

sing to the Lord, all the earth.

Sing to the Lord, bless his name;

*tell of his salvation from day to day.
Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvelous works among all the peoples...
Say among the nations, 'The Lord is king!
The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved.
He will judge the peoples with equity.'*

The call to sing and the song happens *in exile* but the song rises due to the presence of a new just king. The Lord is king! A king who is born of Mary has come to save the world and establish his reign of justice on earth and he begins his rule in poverty from a Bethlehem feeding trough. And because of the incarnation of God from heaven to earth, his justice encompasses the whole cosmos. He comes to set everything right. The nations. The peoples. The heavens. The earth. The sea. The field. The trees of the forest (even the Tarheels!). His reign touches every corner.

And we might think that God's "coming" is to be understood as a future event, and not as an already occurring reality. But God's coming is past, present, and future. God has come and God will come. Already and not yet fully. And when Jesus comes as a baby, eternity touches the earth forever and his eternal presence is with us today, in every corner.

*Let all the world in ev'ry corner sing,
My God and King,
The heav'ns are not too high,
His praise may thither flie:
The earth is not too low,
His praises there may grow...*

*The church with psalms must shout,
No doore can keep them out:
But above all, the heart
Must bear the longest part.*

*Let all the world in ev'ry corner sing,
My God and King,*

*Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;
let the sea roar, and all that fills it;*

let the field exult, and everything in it.

Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy

before the Lord...

Every corner of creation is claimed in its entirety by the sovereign reigning God who comes to us in such a way that we must sing a new song. This "new song" doesn't necessarily indicate a song sung to a tune that has never been heard before, but refers to the beginning of a new era, a new epoch in history, a new reality, a new day in our world. The new song is the reign of God. Jesus Christ is our new song that never grows old but is eternally young, always desiring to be born in our hearts.

And "above all, the heart must bear the longest part" in the eternal song of God as the human heart will sing praise even longer than the church because the human heart is the sacred altar, the holy throne, the home of God. And as we sing, we sing into the future God has for us and signal our eternal future with the angels. As we sing, we preview the eternal anthem of a new heaven and a new earth (Rev 5). We sing, knowing that singing is our endless vocation with the angels and heavenly host.

When Christ is born and song bursts forth, we see our future at his birth, we see our ending in heaven at his beginning on earth. The one Mary delivers, delivers us. The one born of Mary, gives birth to a new creation and is born again in our hearts. His reign will know no end and neither will our eternal angelic refrain, "Glory to God in the highest."

Through all the tumult and the strife,

I hear that music ringing.

It finds an echo in my soul.

How can I keep from singing?

Do you hear what I hear? I hear the singing of angels in your heart:

Gloria, in excelsis Deo

Gloria, in excelsis Deo.