

Psalm 147
Exodus 2: 23-3:15
Matthew 11: 1-6

Singing Our Story
August 31 - Hymn Sunday 2014
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How human it is to sing: we seem to have been created to sing. Babies babbling morphs into chanting and sing-song singing; children on the playground sing their jump rope songs; nations have national anthems; colleges have alma maters. There are sea shanties and chain gang songs; there are advertising jingles we can't get out of our heads. Even those who don't like to sing in church might sing in the shower, or whistle while they work, or croon to a fussy baby.

And we like to listen to singing. Some songs are actually stories or ballads, and we get caught up in them the way we might in a good piece of fiction. When I was in my mid-teens, I would listen to this kind of thing on records and on the radio: popular songs and folk songs, mostly. I loved those sung stories, whether it was *The Leader of the Pack* by the Shangri-Las, or *Matty Groves* by Joan Baez, or some depressing angry ballad by Bob Dylan. Lots of these songs, I've noticed, do not end well. *The Leader of the Pack* has a motorcycle accident; *Matty Groves* and *Lady Arlen* get stabbed to death, etc., etc. Once in a while, there was a happy ending. But the really good songs were inspirational, making us want a better future, like *The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll* – anyone remember Bob Dylan singing that one?

Then there are those songs that were poetic and inscrutable, like Leonard Cohen, more abstract, somehow, but still compelling. Some of these do not have a story line, but are more a series of images that touch a chord, or find an empathetic answering sigh. And when I hear them again, all these years later, I am brought back to those teenage days and feelings. Music lives in our memory – even our muscle-memory, as the neurologist Oliver Sachs writes: "It is evident in all of us—we tap our feet, we 'keep time,' hum, sing along or 'conduct' music, our facial expressions mirroring the rises and falls, the melodic contours and feelings of what we are hearing.

Some of us make the mistake of thinking that "church music" is in a completely different category, but many of the same things are in play. Hymns tell a story. Hymns put more abstract thoughts into poetic language. Hymns connect us to the past and inspire us. In the book, *Sing with Understanding, An Introduction to Christian Hymnology*, the authors defined a hymn as "...a lyric poem, reverently and devotionally conceived, which is designed to be sung and which expresses the worshipper's attitude toward God or God's purposes in human life. It should be simple and metrical in form, genuinely emotional, poetic and literary in style, spiritual in quality, and in its ideas so direct and so immediately apparent as to unify a congregation while singing it." Maybe the best of hymns fit that description. I have printed it in the bulletin in case it's a lot to take in through the ear.

Unifying a congregation – that sounds good. Unity amongst the congregation leading to unity with the divine, perhaps. I'd like to suggest that there are two purposes in singing hymns which overlap. The first is directed horizontally, so to speak, for each other. We sing to teach the stories and remind ourselves of what happened. This helps us understand the struggles and wonders of our own time in context. We sing to soothe or uplift our spirits. But maybe the primary purpose is, so to speak, vertical: the **unified** voice of praise and petition to God. Sometimes we act like the people up here - the minister and the readers and the choir and the musicians – are

leader/performers and the people in the pews are a kind of audience. But, as Soren Kierkegaard reminds us, “we are all actors in the divine theater and God is the audience.”

There is a story that the theologian and chaplain of Duke University, William Willimon, told the story of a woman who came out of Duke Chapel one morning and said, "I hated that final hymn," to which he replied, "That's all right, we didn't sing it for you." In a way, he was right. We **are** singing to and for God, but, still, music in worship is for our own benefit as well.

Hymns reinforce Scripture for us. We read the story of Moses, and sing “let my people go.” This connects us to the 3000 year-old story, to the first people to sing the song, who were lamenting American slavery, and to more modern campaigners for civil rights. We read the Psalm 147 and then sing the 18th century paraphrase by Isaac Watts. Then we hear the words of Jesus: “Go and tell...what you hear and see...” To my mind this is a call to tell **and sing** “what we hear and see” of God’s presence and love. So we are continually seeking to express in new ways – in words, in singing, in living and loving, what it means to follow the one who proclaimed good news to the poor, freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind; the one who set the oppressed free.

To “express in new ways”...do I mean new hymns? This tends to make people a little nervous. Most of us like old hymns. That reminds me of a story. A book was published about 25 years ago called *Children's Letters to God*. Not sure how they were collected, but ...one of them was from a seven-year-old boy named Barry, who wrote plaintively, "Dear God: Church is all right but you sure could use better music. I hope this does not hurt your feelings. Could you write some new songs? Your friend Barry."

Could God write some new songs? Probably, but it is our job to sing old and new as best we can, as expressively and as sincerely as we can. I don’t have to tell you that all the old songs we now love were once...new songs. And many must have taken some getting used to. Let me tell you about one – we are going to sing it in a few minutes. Katherine Hankey was a wealthy young British woman who was inspired to work teaching in the slums of London and nursing with a mission in Africa in the 1850’s and 60’s. In her early thirties, she fell quite ill and was bedridden for 9 months. During that time, she wrote – a bit compulsively, I think – and came up with a poem 100 verses long called ‘The Old, Old Story.’ You will be glad to hear that the version in the Pilgrim Hymnal is only 2 verses long. She wanted to tell an old story, but she wanted to put it into her own words. Nowadays, to me at least, the hymn seems a bit dated – I don’t know if it is the 19th century tune, or what. But I can tell you: the folks at Valley Terrace sing this one with gusto. They have made it their own.

Is there a hymn that speaks to you in this way, perhaps because you learn it so long ago, perhaps because it came at an important moment in your life, perhaps because it was sung in a moment of sadness or protest or celebration that was too deep for plain old words? I wonder which hymn has told the story for you?....

And maybe that’s what we are all here to do: take the old stories, the old themes, the old yearnings that still move us – and start telling it over in new ways. If you are musical, that’s wonderful. If you need to express the old, old story in other new, new non-musical ways, that’s wonderful too. We tell the story with gratitude. We tell it with hope. We tell it in unison. We tell it in harmony. We tell it solo and we tell it with a great chorus, too numerous to name, too varied to imagine. That is our gift to each other and to the world, inspired by the God of many names, many voices, and many blessings. Amen.