

Isaiah 12:1-6

August 30, 2009

South Plains

Songs New And Old

“You are a woodwind and a drum.” That’s the title for a presentation on congregational song at this fall’s worship conference in Richmond. I have no idea what Tom Troeger will say except that I know his reputation for making the beauty of God’s holiness accessible to us all when he leads worship.

“You are a woodwind and a drum.” A clarinet is a woodwind that in the hands of a skilled musician has a wide range of precise, clear notes. A drum on the other hand keeps time loud or soft, but can make only slight variations in pitch. Some of us sing like a woodwind precisely the notes that are printed on the pages of our hymnals. Others, and I include myself here, will sing more like a drum, keeping good time with the words and trying our best to come close to the notes.

In another church, a dear friend used to sit on the aisle in the third pew. He never sang a word of any hymn. He said he couldn’t sing. I have often wondered what childhood trauma he must have suffered to let someone or some experience convince him that it was better not to open his mouth than to make a joyful noise to the Lord. There’s more encouragement in the Bible to sing to the Lord a new song than almost any other instruction.

Moses did it. Miriam did it. Deborah did it. David did it with cymbals and dance. Isaiah, Jeremiah and most of the prophets did it. Isaiah 12 is a song of hope after defeat. Mary did it. Paul did it. And the book of Revelation describes the saints and angels of heaven joining in the song of the Lamb. It’s hard to avoid the impression that singing to the Lord is a pretty important part of our relationship with our God. Whether you are a woodwind or a drum or just a kazoo, you can sing to the Lord.

But how? How can we sing, especially if we don’t feel like singing, or we don’t believe we can sing, or we don’t like the song listed in the bulletin?

It’s hard to imagine a mood or state of mind that scripture would say is inappropriate for singing. When the children of Israel crossed the Red Sea, Miriam sang a song of victory. When David was depressed, he sang the laments of the Psalter. Psalm 137 is a bitter lament, the biblical blues, a song of hardship to rival Negro spirituals. Mary sings, “My soul magnifies the Lord,” right after Gabriel has told her that she would become pregnant and bear the Son of God. That announcement was good news only if she could believe the most impossible, most unlikely, most outrageous miracle. She threw her song in the teeth of everything that was rational and believable. Of course there are times when silence is called for. Time and again, however, the people of God break forth into singing.

For people who believe they cannot sing, singing is a problem. John Bell, the Scottish worship leader, suggests that believing we cannot sing is a peculiar disease of English-speaking people. Approximately one in four of us will say we cannot sing. Somebody in authority told us that; and we filed that fact about ourselves in the drawer of our psyche labeled “embarrassing weaknesses and permanent disabilities.” Bell himself was born with perfect pitch. One day he found himself standing next to a Roman Catholic priest in worship. When worship was over, he turned to the man and said, “It’s good to stand beside a man who actually sings at mass.” The priest protested that he was tone deaf and Bell was trying to make him feel good. “Not at all,” said Bell, “There were three hymns plus a psalm and the Sanctus and you sang every one of them... in tune.” There’s something about congregational singing that not only pleases God, but also gifts us with the grace of music. Whether or not we choose to believe it, is a matter of faith.

But, what if you enjoy singing and really don’t like a particular hymn? Why not make a silent protest? Here’s my answer. Because singing to God is a corporate act as well as the collective action of individuals. When a child sings, we smile with encouragement and make complimentary noises to parents and child. We want to support those amateurish efforts to participate in the congregation because we know they represent the seeds of faith. In the same way, by adding our voice to the hymns we support the faith of

others whose taste and spiritual needs may differ from our own. We nurture the fellowship of the congregation. And, we acknowledge that our preferences, our understanding, our experiences may actually stand in need of change.

The new hymnal that we dedicate this morning will be a valuable resource in making a joyful noise to the God of our salvation. It will not cure all our ills. And, I’m sure it will take some getting used to just because it’s different. Your hymnbook selection committee looked long and hard at the choices before recommending the new *Presbyterian Hymnal* to the session. I want to publicly thank Mary Reitsma who chaired that committee for her careful guidance. And, I want to thank the anonymous donor who freed the committee from economic restraints by a generous gift designated for new hymnals.

Changing hymnbooks is a big step for any congregation. So, let me point out a few of the virtues of these blue babies.

First, they are new with clean white pages, crisp typeface and sturdy binding. They are also old in the sense that many old favorites are still here. In fact, nine of the top ten favorite hymns of South Plains are included in the blue *Hymnal*. The one not included was not in the old red *Hymnbook* either. And, the second most favorite, “How Great Thou Art,” is now available for the very first time. Songs old and new are here.

The second virtue I would point out is the copyright date of 1990. This is a book that takes into account both the terrible and the wonderful things that happened in the second half of the twentieth century. This is a virtue because the next generation of leaders in South Plains, some of whom have not yet appeared, will be people shaped by the events of the last 60 years.

There are Spanish songs, and Roman Catholic songs written since Vatican II. There are songs about outer space; and none of those were imaginable in the 1950's. Most significant is the recognition of children in the new *Hymnal*. The old red *Hymnbook* lists thirteen hymns for children. That reflected a common understanding that children were to be seen but seldom heard in adult worship. I count 76 hymns listed for children in the new blue *Hymnal*. They are not all new, but they reflect a different understanding of the importance of worship for all ages. This is a *Hymnal* for the future of South Plains.

Both the twelfth chapter of Isaiah and the songs in the book of Revelation are about the future. They are songs composed to be sung during times of hardship and stress. The opening chapters of Isaiah contain the fierce judgment of the Lord against God's own people. They have sinned, abandoning their trust in the Lord and their commitment to God's justice. They will be punished. Chapter eleven begins with that tiny ray of hope we hear at Christmas: "A shoot shall come out from the stump of

Jesse." Chapter twelve is the response of the people to salvation:

I will give thanks to you, O Lord,
for though you were angry with me,
your anger turned away,
and you comforted me. ...

Sing praises to the Lord, for he has
Done gloriously.....

Shout aloud and sing for joy. (Isa. 12:1)

The book of Revelation follows a similar strategy for a different situation. When that book was written, the people of God were being punished, not so much for their own sins as for their faith. They were persecuted for following Jesus Christ. The Revelation of John tells a fantastic tale of evil almost overwhelming good. But, in the end, God's promise is sure: the Lamb of God will banish forever the forces of evil. Confident of God's ultimate salvation, the hosts of heaven sing to the Lamb:

You are worthy to take the scroll...

for you were slaughtered and by your blood

you ransomed for God

saints from every tribe and language and

people and nation. (Rev 5:9)

Each song in its own way took aim at the challenges of its time, and each sang to nurture the kind of faith needed for that time. When we sing, we join that happy chorus. We add our voices to the praise that glorifies God. Just as important, those songs feed our

souls and bolster hope even as they affirm faith. You are a woodwind and a drum. Or a kazoo. Whatever you are, add your voice to voices of God's people. Sing faith! Sing hope! Sing the love of God!

God of the sparrow, God of the whale,
God of the swirling stars
How does the creature say Awe
How does the creature say Praise

God of the earthquake, God of the storm
God of the trumpet blast
How does the creature say Woe
How does the creature cry Save
How do your children say Home

When words of our own fail us, we are thankful that we have the words and music of hymns to cry for help, to pray for strength, to give thanks to you. Use these new books to lift our voices to you in worship. We are grateful for the generosity that provided them and for the creativity of your people around the world represented in these tunes and verses.

We dedicate it all to your service, asking for the presence of your Holy Spirit to work through our worship to spread the glory of your name throughout the earth, for Jesus' sake. Amen.