

Sing for Joy by Patty Friesen

Zephaniah 3:14-20, Luke 2:46-55, Colossians 3:16 Third Advent, Dec. 12/21

On this Third Sunday of Advent, we are called by the prophet Zephaniah and Mary to sing for joy. We've been engaging art during Advent and #104 VT is an ink on paper titled *Sing the Goodness*, 2018 by Meg Harder of Waterloo. Fraktur, a Mennonite folk art tradition of illuminated calligraphy inspires Meg Harder's art practice. In her artist statement Harder says, Sing the Goodness responds to passages in the book of Psalms. The Psalms describe singing praise to God with striking physical imagery. The mouth is the site of worship and also the receptacle for God's grace; the lips and the tongue are active participants as well. For this reason, prominent mouths stretch wide over lines of music that seem to occupy real space. In Psalm 71, metaphors of God as rock of refuge are shortly followed by mention of a mother's womb. For this reason, the central motif features strong feminine hands delivering a tiny lamb from the depths of the mountains. Psalm 98 celebrates praise and worship that happen in collaboration with the natural world. This is shown in birds that harmonize, waters that roar and clap their hands, and mountains that sing together to aid the singers in their melodies.

"We cannot be whole without music. Music is not a decoration applied to the liturgy, like icing on a cake. Music is not an ornament on a liturgy. Music is an integral part of liturgical celebration because it is an integral part of a whole human communication, of a full, rich human celebration," says Catholic liturgist Father Hovda. Mennonite musicologist Marilyn Houser Hamm, mother of Kirsten who preached last week puts it this way: "Words of biblical truth and understanding find their home in our hearts and minds if they are given rhyme, meter, and melody. The durable music of the church can bear repetition, and what we repeat we learn by

heart and internalize. And what we rehearse—Sunday by Sunday, year by year defines our identity and shapes our faith” (Singing our Salvation, Marilyn Houser Hamm).

John is a person who was interviewed for a book titled *Singing in a Mennonite Voice* written by Marlene Kropf and Ken Nafziger. He said, “As a young adult, I once found myself unexpectedly in a hospital emergency room. Full of fear as I lay on a table in an examining room, I desperately tried to remember a scripture I could repeat to myself that would bring calm.

Nothing came. Though I searched every corner of my mind, I couldn’t remember a single text I had ever learned. After a few minutes, a hymn began singing itself inside me: “O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home.” I sang the song over and over again until peace returned...I realized that in moments of panic one does not necessarily have access to information stored in the left brain; fear can stop those circuits from functioning. What I did have access to was something embedded more deeply still in my blood and bones—a song I had sung over and over again in worship.”

(Singing, 114)

It is often Sunday’s music which comes us mid-week. The staying power of music exceeds that of sermons! David Cole wrote, “Hymns are certainly more memorable than sermons” (David Cole, “Hymns and Meaning” in *St. Mark’s Review*; autumn, 1991; p. 14). Shucks - maybe Nora and I should sing more sermons! Therefore, it is vital to sing the old favourite hymns week by week, because they strike an internal chord. It is also vital to learn new music, for these songs are additional windows through which God’s grace pours in. It is vital that we teach our children and grand-children to sing, because music binds us together. Apostle Paul was aware of this when he writes the Colossian church instructing them to “sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God”.

We do better reciting scripture in *song*. If I invited us to come up to recite a single verses from Psalm 104, I am guessing none of us could. But there is a hymn that puts much of the text from Psalm 104 into music. If I lead out with the line “I sing the mighty power of God”, then many of you could complete the phrase [that made the mountains rise]; “that spread the flowing seas abroad” [and built the lofty skies].

Music acts as spiritual formation: it shapes our language of and to God, it forms us as a religious community, and it strengthens us in engaging the world (taken from lectures by Marlene Kroft and Kenneth Nafziger at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary; the content also appears in their book, *Singing: A Mennonite Voice*, p.111ff). First, hymns shape our language to and about God. After September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks attendance in churches soared. People came to religious centers to find solace and meaning. Perhaps the most sung hymn those days was “O God, our help in ages past” (#328 HWB). In the circumstance of explosions, destruction and death the church gave hope through the singing of, “O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come, our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home.” The hymn takes the destructive images of our world and makes the stormy blast subject to God’s eternal reign. It is as much a prayer to God as it is a song about God, as it was for John in the ER.

How we sing to and about God matters. My next illustration is a song I learned from my camper and camp staff days- “Our God is an awesome God”. It is a camp favourite because it has a catchy tune and tough actions, but dreadful lyrics. “When He rolls up His sleeves He ain't just putting on the ritz / Our God is an awesome God! / There is thunder in His footsteps and lightning in His fists / The Lord wasn't joking when He kicked 'em out of Eden. It wasn't for no reason that He shed His blood/ His return is very close and so you better be believing that Our

God is an awesome God!” (Words and Music by Rich Mullins). This punitive image of God has more to do with scaring people into the kingdom than it does with inviting people into new life. In the first example God protects us in the midst of the stormy blast; in the second example God is the source of the stormy blast. The music we choose to sing and learn does make a difference in how we image God. As Kenneth Cooper wrote, “Bad theology set to good music is unacceptable, good theology set to bad music is inexcusable, and bad theology set to bad music is intolerable” (G. Kenneth Cooper, “Time to Renew Congregational Singing” *Reformed Liturgy and Music*, spring 1990; p. 100).

Even as singing connects us to God, it also connects us to each other. Singing forms community in at least two ways. First, when we sing together we are physically moving together. Singing is the most physical component of Mennonite worship services. Unlike our Catholic and Pentecostal siblings, we don’t kneel or genuflect or dance but we sing. Mennonite choral conductor Duff Warkentin describes the human body as one giant tuning fork—that we vibrate music into being. When we sing - it is like we are working on a joint project. We take a deep breath together. Then our voices are blended vibrations which create something more beautiful than what we could do alone. Even unison songs blend the individuality of our voices. Singing fosters “interdependence and interconnectedness” (Kropf and Nafziger, 122). From this perspective it is no wonder that in Colossians which mentions church conflict, Paul instructs them to sing together. When we breathe together, and vibrate together, we stand a better chance of getting along as suggested in the new song we just sang, “Together” #389.

A second way in which hymns create community is through the communal memory they impart. Simply put, communities sing certain songs at certain times, particularly at funerals of family and community members. This list includes the German comfort songs: “So nimm den

meine Haende - (Take Thou My Hand)", Verlos und Verlossen – when I'm bereft and lonely and new comfort songs like "In the Bulb There is a Flower." If we turn in our Voices Together to #671 The Hand of God Enfold You that we sung at our November memorial service, I believe this hymn has the power to become another heart song sung at funerals. The meaning of these hymns extend beyond the meaning of the text. These are shared hymns at the time of grieving.

To help us add to our old and new heart songs at funerals and Christmas, it's been an incredible gift to receive a new hymnal a year ago Christmas Sunday. The joy of its' artwork, inclusive language and rich new texts to familiar comfort tunes have helped me personally get through the pandemic. In thanksgiving for this gift that enriches our worship, after Christmas on January 9 we will have a Voices Together Birthday Party with purple cupcakes. Choral director Duff Warkentin will come another Sunday to lead us in a Voices Together hymn sing.

Slide 2 - In closing, let us join together in prayer #882: We are people who must sing you, for the sake of our very lives. You are a God who must be sung by us, for the sake of your majesty and honour. And so we thank you, for lyrics that push us past our reasons, for melodies that break open our givens, for cadences that locate us home, beyond all our safe places, for tones and tunes that open our lives beyond control and our futures beyond despair. We thank you for the long parade of mothers and fathers who have sung you deep and true; we thank you for the good company of artists, poets, musicians, cantors and instruments that sing for us and with us, toward you. We are witnesses to your mercy and splendour; we will not keep silent...ever again. Amen.