

New Songs from Ages Past

a sermon

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Psalm 96

For as long as I can remember, I have been interested in names. I have this fascination with the words we give to describe things: people, places, tools, food. Perhaps you do, too.

What does my name mean? And yours, what does it mean? Why is this city called ‘Rochester’, and this town ‘Brighton’? Who decides what things are called, and who gets to change the names of things when the old names will no longer do?

Some names are just fun to say. Or mis-say. Almost 15 years ago, my daughter for awhile thought we were moving to Rod-chester, which is wrong, but sounds real cool. When she was a very young child, we lived in an apartment building called “Hawk Hall.” It wasn’t until she was 19 years old that she learned that it wasn’t called “Haw Kaw,” like the sound a crow would make — which, again, is wrong, but is a lot more fun to say. Or mis-say.

Some of the words we use to name things are an intentional jumble. Among these are “oxymorons.” Of course, an oxymoron isn’t a stupid person who has been washed with a strong detergent. Instead, an oxymoron is a phrase made from words with two contradictory meanings, sometimes for pointed effect, sometimes unintentionally:

“jumbo shrimp”
“baby grand piano”
“pretty ugly”

I happen to think that we need oxymorons. Because sometimes reality is a little too complex, a bit too subtle, so that for us to describe it we need to reach for the seemingly contradictory. Sometimes, a jumbo shrimp is just what we need.

I think that this is probably what was on the mind of good old Aldus Manutius (the Elder). Aldus Manutius was a great typographer and publisher, way back in the 14- and 15- hundreds. He built on the work of Gutenberg, who of course invented movable type and the modern printing press.

So, in 1499 Aldus took an ancient proverb and adopted it as his own motto: *festina lente*, which means “hurry up slowly.” That’s right: hurry up slowly. It might sound like nonsense, but really it’s great sense: don’t belabor the obvious, make progress deliberately, with some care but with movement. *Festina lente*. Hasten slowly.

(Sounds like good advice for preachers.)



The psalm I read, Psalm 96, seems to be telling us something of an oxymoron. It starts by telling us, “Sing to the LORD a new song .”

But then it tells us what should be part of the new song.
And it seems that most all of what goes into our new song is stuff that isn't new, but instead is, in some ways, very old.

*Sing to the Lord, bless his name;
Tell of [God's] salvation from day to day.
Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvelous works among all the peoples.*

Those who first sang this psalm, and a good many generations who came after them, they knew what these meant, the "salvation," the "marvelous works." These were about

deliverance from Egypt,
miracles in the wilderness,
pillar of cloud and pillar of fire,
manna and quail,
protection from enemies,
a land of their own,
nation and temple,
prosperity and devotion,
God's decisive deeds
that made them into a people,
who would bless the world,
and declare God's glory.

These are not new. These are blessings *remembered*. And yet, "Sing to the LORD a *new* song."

Then the psalm gives some more reasons for singing, and more things to be included in the new song we are to sing:

*For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised;
he is to be revered above all gods.
For all the gods of the peoples are idols,
but the LORD made the heavens.*

The psalm sees God as the only divine being, the only one who is worthy of such praise as one gives to God. And it sees the whole universe, every last thing, as God's creation, even those things that are sometimes worshipped:

every person,
every bird,
every beast,
the skies,
the seas,
each mountain and pebble,
each tree and bush,
each stalk of grain.

This, too, is not new. Those called and made able to worship God in beauty and holiness know all this, have known it for some time. And yet, “Sing to the LORD a *new* song.”

The psalm tells the people to sing a new song. But the things they are to sing about are not brand new things. They are things they have known. They are things they readily recall. Yet, “Sing a *new* song.”

Of course, this all may make us wonder. What is the “new,” or “newness,” of the song? Because it sure isn’t new stuff that we should sing, things brand new and unheard-of. It isn’t about fads or gimmicks. And yet, “Sing a *new* song.”

In our culture, there’s a strong preference for a kind of newness, the newness of *novelty*. Perhaps some of us share that preference.

I happen to like the online music streaming service called Spotify, and a similar one called Pandora. Maybe some of you use one of these, too. I like them because with them I discover all sorts of new music. It’s been a lot of fun. I like hearing new music.

But this preference, this thirst for novelty can become a bit of a problem, if it makes those seduced by it never satisfied with what is already there to be savored, never able to learn from past experiences... their own or that of others. A good many people are so enamored with the novel, and dismissive of the mature and ageless, that they lose all perspective, and lap up every new fad, no matter how shallow or crass, no matter how lacking in depth or breadth.

And yet, we all see that sometimes what’s old becomes new again:

classic rock,
classic movies,
TV-Land and Nick at Night,
remakes of old films,
covers of old songs.

We all know that, with some things, new is not always better, and old (or at least appropriately aged) just may be surely to be prized:

cheese cellared three months or ten or twelve;
wine and scotch aged to fifteen years, even twenty or more;
violins made by Stradivarius and Guarneri;
'67 Mustangs, '57 Thunderbirds,
Model A and Model T.

What’s supposed to be new is not really the *content* of our song. What’s supposed to be new is our *singing*. *That’s* what’s new.

We’re supposed to sing the song of God’s power and might and glory and beauty as if it had sprung to life within our hearts that very morning. And indeed, maybe it had.

We’re supposed to sing with a playfulness and creativity about the song, eager to wind our voices in harmony around God’s own eternal singing, echoing the ancient verse of God’s great love with our own rhythms and tones, these having been called forth and inspired and blessed by the Endless and Ageless Lover of Song.

We’re supposed to sing anew about God’s mercy and love

in creation and providence,
in exodus and exile,

in return and restoration,
in manger and ministry,
in teachings and healings,
in rocking boat and in upper room,
on wooden cross and alongside empty tomb.

We are to sing of all this, newly and ever renewed, so God will be praised, and so that

those who have never heard the song,
and those who have forgotten it,
and those who were offended by out of tune versions of it,
and those who had the singing beaten out of them,
and those who were told they could not sing,
should not sing,
“Please stop singing,”

may each and all hear the song, new, or anew, and be invited to join their voices.

Maybe you think you cannot sing. I beg to differ. Each one of us can sing. Each one of us can add our voices to the song, singing anew each and every day. As those

loved by God,
redeemed by God,
blessed by God;
the people of Jesus;
the holy fellowship bound together by the Holy Spirit;
the community gathered around pulpit, font, and table,

we can be part of the holy choir that declares God’s great love, and “sing to the Lord a new song.”

We don’t have to make it up. We don’t have to compose a brand new song from scratch. The newness of our song is in our singing it. We hear the song of God’s love from ages past as it echoes down through the years,

bringing to life what was dead,
forgiving what was wicked,
welcoming what was lost,
causing faith in the Lord Jesus to rise from hearts formerly hard as stone.



But it is not just from the past that we hear the song. This song, perhaps unique among all songs, also comes to us from the *future*. It sings of God’s coming, about the transformation of all reality that God will bring about.

We hear this in the psalm, at its end:

*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; for he is coming,
for he is coming to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with his truth.*

So, we are to sing a new song, singing anew every day with love for the Triune God and love for all people and love for all creation. Because the song we hear, the song we join in singing, is not only from ages past. It is also

a backwards echo of God's new creation,
reverse thunder of God's fearsome and merciful judgment,
a song that even the elements of creation will join in singing,
heavens and earth,
oceans and streams,
fields and trees and forests.

Sometimes we sing this song, this both ancient and future song, as blissful praise.

Sometimes we sing it as hopeful conviction.

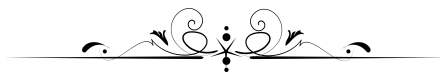
Sometimes we sing it out of yearning.

At times we sing from joy, knowing how blessed by God we are and how blessed we will be.

And there are times when we sing it as a protest song, out of dismay and disappointment with life as it is, so that our singing becomes protest against the hallmarks of our age:

hatred and violence around race and sexuality and nationality,
and every kind of perceived difference.
environmental degradation,
the death of innocents from natural disaster and human misdeeds.

Yet in all of it, we are to sing, and to sing, and to sing again, a new song each time, yet an ancient song, a new song from ages past.



In 1868, an American Baptist minister by the name of Robert Wadsworth Lowry wrote a hymn called "How Can I Keep from Singing?" (Maybe you didn't know that song was so old.) Here's a bit of it:

*My life flows on in endless song;
Above earth's lamentation,
I hear the sweet, tho' far-off hymn
That hails a new creation;*

*Thro' all the tumult and the strife
I hear the music ringing;
It finds an echo in my soul—
How can I keep from singing?*

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*The peace of Christ makes fresh my heart,
A fountain ever springing;
All things are mine since I am his—
How can I keep from singing?*

My friends, let's keep singing.