

“A New Song”

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
First Parish Unitarian Universalist
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“O sing to the Lord a new song.”

It’s a vibrant invitation that marks the first verse of two Psalms of the Old, or First, Testament – the 96th and the 98th. Both are psalms praising God’s glory and greatness. Both praise God as maker of the heavens, as king, and as righteous judge of humankind. What else to do but to sing one’s praises to this God over all, this creator of all, this arbiter of history itself. In awe and wonder and passion, the psalmist sings to the Lord “a new song.”

We who gather in this Meeting House as Unitarian Universalists don’t always do so well with awe or wonder or intense emotion or, for that matter, new songs. Yet here we are astride a new year praising in song the beauty of “the march of days, as seasons come and go,” lifting our voices to “the wonder of thy name,” sharing and listening to voices of joy and concern, praying to the God of us all, and invoking in lyrical meditation, the “Spirit of Life” to “come unto me [and] sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion.”

What is our new song on this threshold of a new year? How do we echo the awe and yearning of the ancient Hebrew psalmist knowing in the bones of his soul that life was not all about him, not all about humankind? Such divine grandeur inspires awe – a form of fear, but not fright, closer to basic wonder. And in a state of wonder, everything is new, everything is fresh. In a state of wonder we open our eyes and ears to the way things are, and we see and hear it as if for the first time, as if we are that slice of Creation’s first witness to what is before us. We see and hear as a child. We blink incredulously. We can hardly believe our eyes. We’re starting over.

Such is the hope that accompanies every New Year, no matter that we mark time by a recycling of our earth around the sun, no matter that the earth and the sun and the dance of the spiraling orbit of one around the other is billions of years old. At the outset of another year, another orbit, we want the freshest possible start.

Yet our songs of this morning are not new to most of us. “How Beautiful the March of Days,” “Spirit of Life,” especially “Auld Lang Syne” strike chords that ring true partly because we’ve heard them before. They grow into the souls of our bones and we into their lyrics and melodies. We are old friends.

Christmas has just passed. I can’t tell you how many requests I received for carols that were “traditional,” for the “old favorites,” for melodies “we could sing.” Yet there was once upon a time a first time that we heard the refrains of “Silent Night, Holy Night.” There was a first time when we heard the jubilant cadences of “O Come, All Ye Faithful.” There was a first time when we sang “The First Nowell.” How we resist new songs, new carols, new sounds of worshipping that jar us out of our seasonal comfort zones.

“... i am running into a new year,” writes the poet Lucille Clifton. I’m not sure whether we run into a new year or whether we’re chased. It arrives with a gust of inevitability. It arrives with the reminder that we can’t go back except in memory. It arrives also with the promise of a fresh start, another chance, a new song.

How caught we are, as if in a push-pull imbroglio with the past and with time passing. As children, seemingly with our lives before us, holidays, birthdays, becoming a big girl or a big

boy can't come fast enough. As adults, ripe and riper, we know decades, scores even, of holidays, birthdays, and other anniversaries of heart and mind that have flown by. Is there ever an age when it's simply okay for time to pass as it does? Not that we have a choice, but, if we did, would we choose exactly what is?

"... sing to the Lord a new song." Why? Because She probably gets tired of our whining. Whatever transcendent ears are open, they probably grow weary of our dissatisfaction with what is, of our shocked dismay that loss or illness has befallen us or someone we love, of our discontent with what is too much, and of the ever familiar realities of wanting more – more space, more intimacy; more freedom, more security; more activity, more respite; more options, more clarity; more shortcuts, more time. I wonder if the psalmist wasn't profoundly attuned to our human penchant for singing the same song again and again and imagining that the God of all had heard quite enough choruses of complaint.

What would a new song even sound like? Yes, I know, you've heard some and winced. A new song, I would suggest, is an acquired sound, an acquired taste.

Think of a food you couldn't stand as a child, but that you now relish. I'll give you an example. It's an easy one. Spinach! Okay, so a weird looking dude called Popeye loved it, gulped it down can after can. Then again, Popeye lived in a comic strip, so what did he know? Spinach, after all, didn't seem to grow in Iowa's long ago gardens from which my family took their harvest (only the most complicated of all primaries, but those were a later crop too). My childhood logic told me spinach grew in cans, and my response was, "Yuk!" Then as a young adult, I was coaxed into trying spinach salad. "This is spinach? This is good stuff!" Yet it was simply a different rendition of the same stuff that came out of a can.

So it is perhaps with the lyrics of our joys and concerns – what we're glad about, what we're celebrating, and what we're hurt about, what devastates us even. From what depth do we draw what troubles us and what is cause for joy? From what level of gratitude that we are here at all do we give shape to our song? Do we sing out loud like we meant it? Do we live out loud like we meant it? With what gusto do we sing our songs, old and familiar, or heard and sung for the first time?

I have a theory. It's hard to sing a song new or old at a service commemorating what is irredeemably past, a person who has passed away. When I preside at a memorial service, and the family asks for a hymn, I'm reticent. Not that I don't think some hymns are completely apt at some memorial services; but what happens at the service itself after I announce the hymn – even if it's known to most of the folks there, even if everyone there is known to each other – is silence. Here I stand singing away, feeling like a soloist, and congregants are parked in the pews completely mute, with a glazed glance at the words in the hymnal.

It happens, even when the deceased has specifically requested a particular hymn, a familiar one; congregants just don't sing – at least not congregants in our faith tradition. Folks will come up to the pulpit and speak about the deceased; we never seem to be at a loss for the spoken word. But the sung word is a different matter altogether. It's hard to sing a new song at a rite marking the brief tenure of how much time we have to sing at all.

To sing a new song is to look at life differently, to reshuffle our deck. The cards are the same, but the arrangement is different. The choices shift. To sing a new song is to reach down into the earliest seedlings of our imagination and plant them as if for the first time. Hear the words of Eleanor Lerman, who understood exactly:

This is what life does. It lets you walk up to the store to buy breakfast and the paper, on a stiff knee. It lets you choose the way you have your eggs, your coffee. Then it sits a fisherman down beside you at the counter who says, Last night, the channel was full of starfish. And you wonder, is this a message, finally, or just another day?

Life lets you take the dog for a walk down to the pond, where whole generations of biological processes are boiling beneath the mud. Reeds speak to you of the natural world: they whisper, they sing. And herons pass by. Are you old enough to appreciate the moment? Too old? There is movement beneath the water, but it may be nothing. There may be nothing going on.

And then life suggests that you remember the years you ran around, the years you developed a shocking lifestyle, advocated careless abandon, owned a chilly heart. Upon reflection, you are genuinely surprised to find how quiet you have become. And then life lets you go home to think about all this. Which you do, for quite a long time.

Later, you wake up beside your old love, the one who never had any conditions, the one who waited you out. This is life's way of letting you know that you are lucky. (It won't give you smart or brave, so you'll have to settle for lucky.) Because you were born at a good time. Because you were able to listen when people spoke to you. Because you stopped when you should have and started again.

So life lets you have a sandwich, and pie for your late night dessert. (Pie for the dog, as well.) And then life sends you back to bed, to dreamland, while outside, the starfish drift through the channel, with smiles on their starry faces as they head out to deep water, to the far and boundless sea.

To sing a new song is not literally to sing, although it can surely include this, but to ponder *what is* differently and to fan out from that pondering refreshed. To sing a new song is to open the arms of our hearts to a channel of starfish and learn how God swims.

Sing it! Sing it whatever it is with all your soul and all your heart and all your mind and all your strength. If faith counts for anything, I trust that God will not be bored!

Amen.

Sources

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