

## New Songs

A cantor, the person who sings the prayers at a synagogue, is bragging before his congregation in a booming, bellowing voice: “Two years ago I insured my voice with Lloyds of London for one million dollars.” In the crowded room, there is a hushed and awed silence. Suddenly, from the back of the synagogue, the voice of an elderly woman is heard, “So what did you do with the money?”

What did you do with the money? That’s the question I would probably hear if I confessed to having received cash for singing lessons, which—by the way—I have not. In the nineteen-sixties, when I was coming of age, it seemed as though there were a song for every situation. There were songs about surfing and songs about cars and songs about young love and songs about breaking up being hard to do. There was even a song about your chewing gum losing its flavor on the bedpost overnight. I loved to sing along with those old songs, and I remember the words to most of them. But don’t worry—you’re never going to see your pastor on that TV show where contestants yell, “Lock in those lyrics!”

We do get self-conscious, don’t we, about singing in settings where other people can actually hear our voices. A member of one of the churches in this charge—a member who shall remain nameless—was

asked if she would like to sing a solo. And she replied, “Sure! I’ll sing so low they can’t hear me.”

But that’s not the way the cantor in the synagogue was singing. And you know, the prayers he was singing were probably psalms. In holy scripture, the Psalms are prayers set to music. Many psalms even contain directions for the musicians, in the Psalter, Israel’s book of hymns. Expressing every emotion human beings can feel, the Psalms are intimate communion with the Holy One. In our Judeo-Christian tradition, singing hymns to God’s glory goes back a long way.

And from the beginning, the people called Methodists have loved to sing. Methodists are proud to claim as our own Charles Wesley, one of the greatest and most prolific hymn writers of all time. Our *United Methodist Hymnal* contains more than fifty of his hymns, which can be found in the hymnals of other denominations as well. Christians love Charles Wesley’s hymns. “O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing” has itself been translated into many tongues. And what would Christmas be without the joy of “Hark! the Herald Angels Sing”? How could Easter be celebrated without the exultation of “Christ the Lord Is Risen Today”?

Nobody sings like Methodists, as Garrison Keillor observes. He adds, “if you were to ask an audience in New York City, a relatively Methodist-less place, to sing along on the chorus of ‘Michael, Row the Boat Ashore,’ they will look daggers at you...But if you do this among

Methodists, they'll smile and row that boat ashore and up on the beach!  
And down the road!

Ever since the eighteenth century, we Methodists have loved to sing together. When we're singing together, we're not as concerned about having others hear us because our voices blend in with the congregation. But because we like to sing, John Wesley, brother of Charles and founder of Methodism, figured that if we were going to spend a major portion of our worship time singing, he had better give us some instructions so we would do it right. You'll find John Wesley's "Directions for Singing" at the very beginning of *The United Methodist Hymnal*, right before the contents page. They're part of his legacy to us. You heard them read a few moments ago.

Wesley's earnest instructions for singing were written nearly two hundred fifty years ago. Our English language has changed a great deal in two hundred fifty years. Some of the wording may make us smile, like when we're told to "sing lustily and with a good courage"! But as we smile, we need to be mindful that these instructions represent Wesley's sincere attempt to guide us in lifting our voices to the glory of God.

It's interesting that in these directions, Wesley's first words are, "Learn these tunes before you learn any others." Wesley encourages us to learn *all* our hymns and not to sing only those we already know and love. We like to sing our favorites. It's true. Human nature resists change. But allow me to share a personal experience with you.

Many years ago, before the publication of *The United Methodist Hymnal*, I took the Methodist hymnal used back in the day and made a list of my favorite hymns. Well. Decades passed, and the Church began using *The United Methodist Hymnal*. One day I was looking through the previous hymnal, and—surprise!—out fell that old list. Reading it was an epiphany. If today I prepared a new list of favorites, many of those beloved hymns would still be on it. But in addition, there would be many *new* favorites: profoundly meaningful hymns I had never heard or sung when the old list was made. If I had sung only the hymns on that old list, I would have missed out on the joys of experiencing new places to which music can move me and learning new ways to sing God’s love. For what are hymns but love songs to God? Music, the soul of our worship, has power to evoke feelings of which we ourselves may have been previously unaware. Music touches the deepest recesses of our hearts.

Have you ever heard the expression, “A stranger is just a friend you haven’t met yet”? It’s the same with music. An unfamiliar hymn is just one that you don’t yet know; one that just might become a favorite.

*The United Methodist Hymnal* and *The Faith We Sing* contain a wealth of musical resources. Some selections are more than five hundred years old. Some are contemporary expressions. Our hymnody is a kaleidoscope of old and new, and of the musical traditions of “all who follow Jesus, all around the world.” As United Methodists, we celebrate

the rich diversity of cultural gifts offered to us in song. Even as we love to sing all of the beloved favorites we grew up with, we treasure the music of the church universal, the hymns of Christians of all times and places.

So, sharing with you our Wesleyan heritage, I invite you to embrace new musical experiences in our worship—to join with the psalmist in singing to the Lord a new song. In today’s psalm, “the hills sing for joy together before the Lord,” and in the parallel imagery of this Sunday’s Old Testament reading, the mountains are called to join in the singing. For in the time of the Exile, God speaks through the prophet Isaiah, offering hope to Israel, languishing in the midst of despair, far from home.

God makes promises to Israel in exile. God will hear their cries and answer their prayers. God will free them from captivity. This God who is all compassion will guide their journey and sustain them on their way with good things: nourishing food and cool, clear water. God will save them and restore them to their land. God will bring them home, for God’s love of Israel is greater even than a mother’s love for her own baby. God will never forget God’s own people.

The Bible tells us of Israel, an actual, historical people. But it suggests Israel in a metaphorical sense as well. My brothers and sisters, you—the church—are Israel. You are God’s own people. God can never forget you and *will* never forget you, for your very own name is written

forever on the palms of God's hands. When this world of brokenness is too much with you; when life feels as though you are a stranger in a strange land, God hears your cries from exile and answers your prayers. In Jesus Christ, God releases you from bondage and frees you from all that enslaves you. God calls you out of darkness into God's marvelous light. God comes as a Savior, guiding you on this journey, walking with you, nurturing you, delivering you, bringing you at last to a home from which you can never be exiled.

God who is faithful keeps God's promises. This God loves you with a love so steadfast, so tender—what can you do but sing? You have been created to praise God and enjoy God forever. With the hills and mountains and all of the good creation, what can you do but sing with a grateful heart to this God who first loved you, this God who fills you with hope and joyous anticipation of the time when you will sing a new, new song with all the saints in glory?

In the name of God the Creator, God the Christ, and God the blessed Holy Spirit. Amen.