

Sing a New Song

June 2, 2013

Psalm 96

There is something that I still hear expressed by some folks even today, and I admit that it surprises me somewhat, even though I believe I understand where the folks who are saying it get the idea.

What I'm talking about is the notion that God speaks to us and reveals himself to us only in 66 books that we call the Bible, and that God just stopped speaking and revealing at the end of the book of the Revelation.

Those who believe this way say that if it's not in here, it's not of God. If any of you here feel or have felt that way, I hope I can help you this morning to look at things from a different perspective.

Now, certainly, scripture does perpetuate words and ways of speaking about and thinking about God, and does so in many different ways - in stories, in genealogies, in teachings, in songs.

We have talked a lot about this in our Bible study group and men's group. This morning, let's look at it first of all from an historical perspective.

At various times in history, Judaism and then Christianity made decisions about what words and ways of speaking about God would be designated as scripture, and what would not.

For Judaism near the time of Christ, rabbis debated what books should be added to the Law and the Prophets – resulting in that portion of the Old Testament we call the “Writings” – I and II Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah, Ruth, Esther, Job Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Lamentations, Daniel

In third and fourth century Christianity, the great councils of the church settled on which gospels and epistles ought to be judged as the “canon” or norm of scripture.

At each of those junctures, however, an important consideration always involved discerning how God spoke or revealed himself in new ways.

In the first century AD, the Law and the Prophets were not enough for Judaism. New words and understandings and revelations of God rooted in Israel's experiences following the exile and returning to the land needed inclusion.

For the Christian church, the Hebrew Scriptures were not enough. New words and understandings and revelations of God rooted in Christ's life and ministry and church needed inclusion. Or, to put it in the language of our psalms this morning, new songs needed to be sung.

Particular settings in life often generate a language peculiar to them. Words employed in a surgical waiting room will be very different from words shouted in the bleachers of a baseball park.

Words expressed at a party or social gathering will generally be different from those whispered in the reception area of a mortuary.

Certain words and ways of speaking come to have associations with those settings – which is well and good, until those words and ways become jargon, repeated from generation to generation, with little or no thought or understanding given to what they mean or why we even use them, except “that is what we have always said here.”

“These are our traditions” can be little more than a pious way of saying “these are our ingrained habits.”

Our Old Testament reading for today, Psalm 96, brings a critical word to such attitudes and lines in the sand: new songs need to be sung.

The Psalm opens with that thought – “Sing a new song to the Lord.” And recall the verbs and nouns employed, some of them repeatedly, throughout: bless, ascribe, sing, song, salvation, revere, sanctuary, rejoice, exult.

When we enter into the language of this psalm, we do so largely with the vocabulary of praise. The opening two verses especially read and sound like a call to worship or the encouraging of a choir director in preparation for leading music.

The praise in this psalm has traditionally been associated, at least in its origin, with ceremonies related to enthronement or coronation, either for a new king or in a yearly renewal of covenant to God as sovereign.

In more recent times, Psalm 96 has become incorporated by the lectionary not only into the readings of this Sunday in so-called Ordinary Time, which we have now begun to refer to as Sundays after Pentecost, but also it is the designated psalm for Christmas Eve, celebrating the new song God is singing in the dawn of redeeming grace, as Joseph Mohr so beautifully put it in his hymn text.

Notice also that there is another vocabulary at work in this psalm. It is a use of language that makes sure the psalmist addresses the broadest audience possible: “peoples,” “nations,” “earth” occur repeatedly.

And so does a tiny three-letter word: “all.” The psalmist summons “all the earth” to sing to God. “All the peoples” are called to declare God’s works. The psalmist bids rejoicing from “all” that fills the sea and “all the trees.” Why? For God is “above all gods.”

Psalm 96 does not offer a parochial vision of what it means for one people or community to engage in relationship with and praise of God.

The psalmist invokes a new song, one that sings the promise of God's universal realm and sovereignty – and of the place given to all peoples and all nations in all the earth.

Some might see this expansive inclusivity as part of what is new in the new song. In truth, however, the psalmist's all-encompassing vision traces back to the ancient covenant with Abraham: "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen 12:3).

God not only makes room for all. God also makes it an imperative that we share in that welcoming and "homecoming" for all in the presence of God who created all.

Psalm 96:2 speaks of our telling God's salvation. The Hebrew verb translated as telling is *basar*, the equivalent of the New Testament Greek word *euaggelion*: "to tell good news."

Basar appears with frequency in Isaiah 40-55, where the telling of the promised release from exile intends to stir and renew Israel's faith – and her following of God in new ways.

To be a singer of this new song is to be an evangelist, which is simply a fancy word for someone who does not hide light under a bushel.

We are living in a time when "new," as it applies to our worship of and relationship with God is a mixed bag.

It strikes fear in the hearts of some, who see the erosion of their "old-time religion" and the cherished songs and hymns being replaced by contemporary praise choruses and such.

Others welcome this as a move from the staid "sameness" of old to new and exciting ways of praising God.

To me, it's a shame that many draw a line and make it an "either/or" proposition, particularly those who are uncomfortable or less comfortable with "new."

But if at times the songs of God's works are new to us or others, it is because God comes revealed in new ways or by unconsidered actions.

And not just in our time. We sometimes forget that the "old songs" of our faith that seem so familiar to us were at one time startling if not a bit off-putting to an earlier day's "conventional wisdom."

Let me share with you a letter that was written by someone complaining about the song selection and music in worship:

"I am no music scholar, but I feel I know appropriate church music when I hear it. Last Sunday's new hymn - if you can call it that - sounded like a sentimental love ballad one would expect to hear crooned in a saloon. If you insist on exposing us to rubbish like this - in God's house! - don't be surprised if many of the faithful look for a new place to worship. The hymns we grew up with are all we need."

This letter was written in 1863 and the song they were concerned about was "Just As I Am".

Here's another letter: "What is wrong with the inspiring hymns with which we grew up? When I go to church, it is to worship God, not to be distracted with learning a new hymn. Last Sunday's was particularly unnerving. The tune was unsingable and the new harmonies were quite distorting."

This letter was written in 1890 about the hymn "What A Friend We Have In Jesus".

And yet in the 19th century, there was only one style of worship, what we call today traditional worship. So why are there so many styles of worship today? The simple answer is because there are so many different types of people.

For the first time, the church is faced with the challenge of ministering to 5 living generations. In the 19th century, people were pretty much the same. They liked the same music, held the same values, and believed the same things.

But after WW II, we began to see a greater diversity appearing among people and generations. I won't take the time to go into all the details but I'm sure you recognize many of the differences between the generations and their preferences in worship.

The G.I. Generation and the Silent Generation are those born before 1946. They are very cautious and that makes them suspicious of great changes, especially in the church.

Baby Boomers, born between 1946 and 1965, mistrust authority, government and other institutions their parents honored and served. They come to church with a "what's in it for me" mentality.

And we have the Generation Xers and the Millennials, each with their own preferences and needs.

And the problem with all that is that Sunday worship time has become the most segregated time of the week, racially and generationally. This type of service for you, this type of service for you, and on it goes. It seems that we are not one, but divided, according to our personal preferences.

But listen to what Jimmy Cutter writes, "Many Christians misunderstand the purpose of congregational worship. Many times our congregational worship has become an experience in which (we are) the focus.

“Worship has deteriorated into an "I didn't get anything out of that sermon" experience. (We have) become the object of own worship. (We are) there to be entertained and spiritually massaged. It hardly occurs to some that worship is primarily a matter of God receiving something from us: our praise, adoration, and confession of dependence on Him as our Sovereign.”

Worship is not about us or our needs, it's about God and giving him the praise and worship he deserves.

And God consistently acts in new and unexpected ways, so God's people are moved to add new songs to our repertoire of witness and celebration.

Now I know: we love to sing the familiar songs of faith, literally and figuratively. And that would be all we ever had to do if God had stopped speaking and working two thousand years ago.

We could keep doing what we have always done, singing what we have always sung, being among those we have always been among.

But God keeps springing up in new ways and among new ones, urging us to sing new songs: songs of mission and ministry, songs of justice and compassion, and yes, even songs new to our worship.

Our spirits need to be open to the new songs that emerge from God's fresh actions among us: taken for the sake of creation and redemption, as always, but actions that may take new directions – and may take *us* in new directions.

Do we want to do that kicking and screaming, digging in our heels, holding our breath until we turn beet red so we can keep things the way they are . . . at least in our memory? Or do we want to “sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth”?

There's that word “all” again. How will God work to bring all nations and all peoples into the choir? Faith does not take a “wait and see” attitude. Faith takes a “come and serve” – or should we say, “come and sing” – attitude.

God is not silent. God has not stopped speaking. The God who made the heavens and earth continues to recreate them. And thanks be to God for inviting us to lend our voices to the new songs as well as the old.