Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Third Sunday of Advent

December 17, 2017

Neal MacPherson

SONGS OF HOPE, JOY, AND RESISTANCE Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–11

 Luke 1:46–54

 I’m sure you have noticed the important role music plays in the worship life of our congregation. The organ sounds forth. The choir sings, and we all sing the songs of faith. It matters not how well we sing or whether we sing “on key” or “off key.” The important thing is to sing, and to sing out with as much gusto we can muster.

 It’s important to sing as we await the birth of the Christ Child. Can you imagine the worship of God during this Advent season without music?

This morning, I invite us to reflect together on the importance of music and singing as acts of faith—not faith in the power structures of our society or in our economic system, nor faith in the ways of empire, but faith in God. Every time we sing the Doxology—

 *Praise God from whom all blessings flow;*

 *Praise God all creatures here below;*

 *Praise God above ye heavenly host;*

 *Creator, Christ, and Holy Ghost.*

—every time we sing these words, we are declaring our faith in the God who reigns over all power structures, over every economic system, over every social institution, including the institution of the church, over all the nations of the earth. We sing the Doxology, and we declare our faith in God alone.

 Singing and music making in the context of worship are acts of faith, and they are also acts of hope and courage. Even in the midst of trial and suffering, even in the darkest of days, we dare to sing. We sing not only when all is well, but also in times of pain and struggle. We sing even in times of death and mourning. We sing, and courage and hope are kindled within us.

 This morning, I would like to add yet another dimension to our acts of music making and singing in the context of our life together. Music making can also be bold acts of protest and resistance against the way things are in our world.

 In this connection, let us first turn to the scriptures, and remind ourselves of the power of music among the Jewish exiles in the 6th century BCE. To the people in exile, the Word of God is declared through the words of the prophet: Your exile is coming to an end. You shall leave this place and I will lead you through the wilderness and you will return home. Declares God through the prophet:

 . . . *you shall go out in joy,*

 *and be led back in peace;*

 *the mountains and the hills before you*

 *shall burst into song,*

 *and all the trees of the field shall*

 *clap their hands. —* Isaiah 55:12

This is surely an invitation to sing. Walter Brueggemann reflects:

Everyone sings. It is a new song, commissioned just for this meeting, never heard until now, and it grabs Israel in exile. It grabs all of creation. Everybody joins the song: the sea, the coastline, the desert, the cities, the villages. They all sing

 a new reality.

 This is what they sing about: Yahweh is on the move! Yahweh has long been silent and is now active. Yahweh has been absent and is now powerfully present.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The song is dangerous for it is a song that is sung in the midst of empire. The faithful are invited to sing songs of resistance and hope, dangerous songs. This morning’s reading from Isaiah takes up the theme, only now the song is sung by the returned exiles in the midst of a devastated city and a ruined temple:

 *I will greatly rejoice in God,*

 *my whole being shall exult in my God;*

 *for God has clothed me with the garments of*

 *salvation,*

 *God has covered me with the robe of*

 *righteousness,*

 *as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,*

 *and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.*

 *For as the earth brings forth its shoots,*

 *and as a garden causes what is sown to*

 *spring up,*

 *so the Sovereign God will cause righteousness*

 *and praise*

 *to spring up before all the nations.*

 —Isaiah 61:10,11

The dangerous song continues to be sung. As Mary awaits the birth of her son, she sings *Magnificat,* “My soul magnifies the Lord.” Mary, lowly, but not exactly the meek and mild woman we are led to believe she was, turns her joyful song into an act of resistance:

 *God has shown strength with God’s arm;*

 *God has scattered the proud in the thoughts*

 *of their hearts.*

 *God has brought down the powerful from*

 *their thrones,*

 *and lifted up the lowly;*

 *God has filled the hungry with good things,*

 *and sent the rich empty away.* —Luke 1:51–53

 Mary’s Magnificat has inspired songs of hope and resistance throughout history. Oppressed people, persecuted people, poor and hungry people have dared to sing their own songs in honor of her song. Black people in the midst of slavery sing:

*When Israel was in Egypt’s land,*

*Oppressed so hard they could not stand.*

*Let my people go.*

*Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt’s land,*

*Tell old Pharaoh to let my people go.*

Jewish captives in the concentration camps of World War II sing the Kaddish as an act of faith and resistance. It is dangerous to sing and yet they sing:

 *May His great name be blessed*

 *for ever, and to all eternity!*

 *blessed and praised, glorified and exalted,*

 *extolled and honored, adored and lauded*

 *be the name of the Holy One, blessed be He,*

 *above and beyond all the blessings,*

 *hymns, praises, and consolations*

 *that are uttered in the world! And say, Amen.*

Japanese nationals and Japanese Americans in their concentration camps make music and try to carry on their lives with strength and courage. Members of the 442nd Infantry Regiment stationed at Fort Shelby take their ukuleles and visit the camps. There they play their instruments and sing.

 African American men, women, and children, along with those wanting to join them, sing:

*We shall overcome. We shall overcome.*

*We shall overcome some day.*

*Oh, deep in my heart, I do believe*

*We shall overcome one day.*

 These all sing, knowing that God is with them and for them in their struggle for freedom, justice and for peace. In a sense, they all sing and make music in honor of Mary and her song. They sing, knowing that God has upset the order of things, and is doing the same, and will do so in the time to come. The proud are scattered; the powerful lose their power; the rich are sent empty away. The poor and lowly are lifted high; the hungry are filled with good things. Mary’s song— talk about an incentive for the captive, the poor and hungry to resist!

In truth, throughout history songs of danger, songs of hope have been sung, songs of joy, songs of resistance. You will recall the year 1973 when the democratically elected president of Chile, Salavador Allende, was killed and the dictator Pinochet took over. Overnight, truth was suspect. Truth was dangerous. Squads of soldiers hit the streets trying to silence truth. The Chilean army rounded up over 6000 students from the University of Santiago and herded them into Santiago’s huge soccer stadium which was converted into a kind of prison camp. For fun, the soldiers fired their machine guns into the crowd and by police order no one was allowed to touch the bodies where they fell. Among the group of students was one of Chile’s most popular singers, Victor Jarra. His music was a ministry of resistance during a time of crisis. When those in charge realized he was there with his guitar, they brought him to a table in the center of the stadium and made him place his hands on it. They took a hatchet and cut off the fingers, first of one hand, then the other. He fell. They kicked him and laughed: “Now let’s hear you sing.” Somehow Victor Jarra found the strength to stand up. He found the strength to raise his arms, “Amigos,” he said, “Friends, vamos a cantar. Let us sing.” And they did. The whole stadium of frightened students began to sing with one unstoppable voice. The singing continued after Victor Jarra was shot down and even as bullets continued to rain down upon the crowd. [[2]](#footnote-2)

 Dangerous songs. Songs of joy, hope and resistance. The song of the exiles. Mary’s song. The songs of those enslaved and oppressed. Victor Jarra’s song. The songs of all who struggle for justice and peace. If all these can sing their songs, so can we, so must we.

O God, give us the strength and courage to keep on singing, for your Christ is coming to make all things new. All thanks and praise be unto you, this day and forever. Amen.

1. Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997) 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Acknowledgement: I am indebted to Pastor Heidi Neumark for her description of the death of Victor Jarra. It is found in a sermon she gave commemorating the third anniversary of 9/11 at Trinity Lutheran Church in New York City. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)