

“Everyday Graces”
Psalm 96:1-9
A Sermon by Rev. Bob Kells

“O sing to the Lord a new song...” That phrase has extra special meaning for us today. Today we worship with live music. We’ve gone through quite a dry spell without it. For some of us, this is the first time we’ve had live music in worship for a long time. So, this is a day to rejoice, to sing...if not new songs...to sing them in a new way. And that is something of a challenge and a frustration for us as we worship because we cannot sing as we used to. For indoor worship, for safety’s sake, for the sake of all who gather with us to worship God, we cannot vocalize our songs.

- We do this out of respect for the coronavirus pandemic.
- We do this out of care and concern for each other.
- We do this because we are committed to doing no harm to another.

No, today we cannot verbalize our praise of God in song. But it doesn’t mean we can’t still sing praise to God. Confusing?

Let’s think about this in a different way: Do you remember how you learned a new song?

When I was young, I remember hearing new songs on the radio. They used to make a big deal about newly released songs in those days. The DJs would give a big build-up before playing them; they would announce a new song from The Beatles, or Elton John, or The Rolling Stones would be played in the next hour; and, I would keep listening because I didn’t want to miss it. And after it played, naturally I wanted to go out and buy the 45 record (no CDs yet) so I could listen to it over and over again to learn the words. At night, I would play the song over in my head to be sure I got it right.

Nowadays, there’s still a big excitement when a new song comes out; they appear first on itunes or some other online platform. Sometimes, my daughter tells me when one of her favorites has a new song...there was one from Taylor Swift recently.

I still run songs over and over in my head but...beware, some songs can get stuck there that don’t belong...if you’ve ever heard “Baby Shark,” you know what I mean.

When I learn a new song...and this may be true for many of us...I don’t have to sing it out loud. I can sing it in my head. It’s different. In the time of COVID, we need to sing our songs in a different way.

In today’s scripture lesson, the psalmist calls on all who can hear:

O sing to the Lord a new song;
sing to the Lord, all the earth.

Sing to the Lord, bless his name;
tell of his salvation from day to day. (Psalm 96:1-3)

What is this new song we are to sing?

It is a song of God’s salvation and of God’s redemption, and of God’s work to bring new life out of old.

Through the prophet Isaiah, God urged the people of Israel:

“Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” (Isaiah 43:18-19)

And in the Revelation to John of Patmos, Jesus says:

“See, I am making all things new.” (Revelation 21:5)

God is about the business of renewing what is old and restoring that which was lost.

The new song is sung by all the earth.

Here is an extraordinary thing! It's not just the people of God who sing but all peoples, everywhere; all things in creation.

“Let everything that has breath praise the Lord!” (Psalm 150:6)

This is a call to universal praise of the God who created everything!

The new song is sung in praise of God's everyday graces.

“Tell of his salvation from day to day.”

You know, we tend to focus a lot on the big things in life: graduations and promotions, weddings and first jobs, splendid vacations and golden anniversaries. Don't get me wrong: These big events are worthy of giving thanks to God. But what about the little things. Do we thank God for the everyday graces of our lives...graces like:

- Waking up into a new day...simply taking that first breath in the morning.
- Watching a butterfly or a bee as it silently flits from flower to flower in search of food.
- Holding the hand of someone you love...for a good long time.
- Helping your next-door neighbor with the groceries, or a chore, or just sitting with them for a time.
- Taking a walk through a quiet wood, the squirrels scurrying through the leaves while birds sing glory to the day.
- Having dinner...just an ordinary, any-day-of-the-week dinner...with someone you see all the time.
- Falling asleep in a hammock on a summer's day.
- Putting a log on the fire to chase away the winter chill.

These are wondrous gifts God gives to us. The big events are worthy of thanks, but most of life is lived in the little details of the everyday. They are the simple, innocuous, so-common-we-don't-give-them-a-second-thought, graces God gives us. God is the source of every grace.

Are we perceiving what we are receiving from God?

Let us remember to thank God for the everyday graces in our lives:¹ “Tell of his salvation from day to day.”

But some will ask, how can we sing a new song in a world that's gone so wrong? After all, our age is filled with troubles: disease, poverty, political strife, racial injustice, bigotry, environmental injustice, violence, abuse, and more. How dare we declare God is charge in the middle of this mess? How dare we not declare it.

You see, the psalmist faced the very same questions. The psalmist spoke to and for a people who had suffered, and were suffering, at the hands of others. They had their own troubles: enslaved in Egypt, wandered through a wilderness, beset by enemies in a land that was supposedly Promised, overthrown by empires, deported to a strange land...exiled! How dare a people in exile sing a new song? How could they not dare it? Because even in the middle of their exile...even in the midst of our own troubles...God is doing a new thing. Other people around them...around us...didn't believe it. They didn't believe it because they didn't see it.

“Do you not know? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood since the earth was founded?” (Isaiah 40:21)

As God's people, we are called to sing a new song, in a new way, even when no one else can see what God is doing...even when we don't see it...that's what we call faith.

Have you ever been at a sporting event or in the middle of a large crowd, and all of sudden people nearby just start cheering? You can't see what they are cheering for...maybe the star of the show just arrived out of your sight, or maybe you didn't see the player who just scored a goal...you can't see it, but you join in the cheering just the same.

¹ John Wilkinson, “Psalm 96:1-9 (10-13), Homiletical Perspective,” in David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4, Season After Pentecost 2*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 179.

That's what the psalmist was doing...that's what we are called to do: To sing God's praises even when the reason to sing praise is not readily apparent. We sing praise anyway, because we know God is on the move;

- God's kingdom is here, already, but not fully;
- God's kingdom is coming into the world;
- and, as kingdom people, we sing a new song to the God of the universe.

The song we sing, we sing in a new way, giving thanks to God for the everyday graces.

I really love the song "Morning Has Broken." I love it because it reminds me of God's everyday graces that are new each day:

Morning has broken, like the first morning;
blackbird has spoken, like the first bird.

Praise for the singing! Praise for the morning!

Praise for them, springing fresh from the Word!²

In the beginning God spoke, and the universe came into being. The God who creates, recreates. The God who makes new, renews. The world is new again with the coming of a new day.

Are we perceiving what we are receiving from God?

We cannot sing out loud right now, but we can sing in a new way:

- We can pray these songs.
- We can hum these songs, allowing their sounds to resonate in our souls, our being, moving us to greater love of God.
- And we can sing God's praises in our hearts.

I want to share part of a poem with you. It was written by a remarkable young man named Mattie Stepanek. Mattie was born with a rare form of muscular dystrophy. He lived much of his life on crutches, in a wheelchair, and on a ventilator. But these physical impairments did not stop him from expressing his love of life and his love for God through poetry, which he started writing at the age of three. He befriended the famous and not so famous—former President Jimmy Carter was one of his inspirations, and he was a friend of Oprah Winfrey. Mattie died a month shy of his 14th birthday in 2004. But his spirit lives on in his poetry. This is part of his poem called "Heartsong":

I have a song, deep in my heart,
And only I can hear it.
If I close my eyes and sit very still
It is so easy to listen to my song.
When my eyes open I am so busy and moving and busy,
If I take time and listen very hard,
I can still hear my Heartsong.
My Heartsong sounds like this—
 I love you! I love you!
 How happy you can be!
 How happy you can make
 This whole world be!...
Everyone has a special song
Inside their hearts!
Everyone in the whole wide world

² Eleanor Farjeon, "Morning Has Broken," UMH 145.

Has their own special heart-song.

And if you believe you can be happy, then you, too, will hear your song.³

We have a new song to sing in a new way. It's a song about the God who is making a new way for us...a way through the pandemic...a way through our divisions and discords...through the poverty and despair...through our world, remaking a new world...a way into a life based on love that God gifted to us in Jesus Christ.

Are you perceiving what you are receiving from God as a grace, a blessing, a life affirming event, no matter how small?

What are your everyday graces? What is the song of your heart...your "heartsong"...that only you can sing about God's goodness to you?

Amen.

³ Mattie Stepanek, *Heartsongs*, (Alexandria, VA: VSP Books, 2001), 25.