

Sing!

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November 29, 2010

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On a Sunday when John the Baptist's call for repentance roars in our ears, we need reminders of the precedence of gift, the prevenience of grace. For John's sermonic cry to "prepare the way of the Lord" can seem all task and no gift. It calls out the Pelagian in all of us, the voluntarist who wants to build the kingdom. Careless hearing leads us to imagine that if we "make his paths straight," he will come.

But this isn't *Field of Dreams*; it is Matthew. And Matthew has already made it plain that the one who comes does so not by our planning and preparing but by the Spirit's initiative (1:20). Matthew has shown us that the one who requires straight paths has come to us by a crooked genealogical journey (1:2-6).

So the logic of John's gospel, the grammar of his cry, is this: he is coming! Prepare the way. God initiates; we respond. Even before his arrival, the announcement of his coming empowers and enables our transformation. We don't convert so that he will come, or worse, so that he will like us when he gets here. We convert because he is coming; we repent because he already loves us.

Perhaps the musical imagery of the epistle can help us with the grammar of the Advent gospel. Singing is hard work. Singing is perfect freedom. Singing is, therefore, a good analog of the gospel, which is always a free, freeing gift and yet also a claiming, obliging command.

Ask a voice major whether singing comes naturally, and the honest answer would surely be "yes and no." Yes, musicality is given; yes, talent is a gift. And no, musicality requires training, practice, study, attention and care. But it is gift before

task, the given before the return. All the desire in the world is insufficient to transform a tone-deaf droner into a diva. All the effort in the world could never convert a broken voice into sonorous song. There is a giftedness that precedes.

But when the soloist soars, when the choir blends, those moments are not native reflex or raw talent but cultivated skill--a perfect blend of given grace and offered effort. Does that finally mean that musical harmony is half talent and half effort, that spiritual harmony is 50 percent God's blessing and 50 percent our response?

Of course not. That would be parity, a competition between talent and study, as if practice and skill were not the form of talent's freedom. Parity is stuck with competitive notions of grace and response, as if disciplined discipleship were not the true form of gospel freedom.

Whether we're imagining music or the gospel, the reality isn't parity but *paradox*. The paradox of song is that when the music is most perfectly performed, it is also most free--almost as if the power of singing is not in us but in the song. The paradox of the gospel is that the harmony we sing, the harmony in which we live, is total gift. It is granted by "the God of steadfastness and encouragement," it accords with Christ Jesus (Rom. 15:5) and it is empowered by the Holy Spirit (15:13). Thus it is God before, Christ beside, the Holy Spirit within.

There are some great imperatives in Romans 15. Live in harmony with one another (15:5); glorify God together with one voice (15:6). Stop fighting about music in worship (my transposition of "welcome one another" [15:7]). But don't be misled--it isn't up to us. God grants; Christ welcomes; the Holy Spirit inspires. So sing!