

Prophetic creativity

By [Brian Bantum](#)

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*For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page, which includes Bantum's current Living by the Word column as well as past magazine and blog content. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.*

In the wake of Michael Brown's shooting by Darren Wilson and the subsequent protests in Ferguson, [Lauryn Hill posted a song called "Black Rage."](#) With the sounds of her family in the background, Hill played the tune of "My Favorite Things" and sang new words slanted ironically and prophetically towards the unfolding tragedy of the City's response with tanks and tear gas:

Hill's lyrics point to the wider realities of discrimination and inequality faced by black Americans on a daily basis:

Black rage is founded on draining and draining,  
Threatening your freedom to stop your complaining,  
Poisoning your water while they say it's raining,  
Then call you mad for complaining, complaining.

Her use of Rodgers and Hammerstein recalls [an appropriation of the same tune by John Coltrane](#). Coltrane's version shapes the tune's melody into a recognizable but tormented yearning for peace in the midst of terror and fear. Relying upon the familiarity of the tune to recall the joy and comfort of Julie Andrews, Coltrane turns the harmonies into dissonances and the melody into cries of pain and hope. (You can read my theological interpretation of Coltrane's "My Favorite Things" [here](#).)

This modulation of the familiar, appropriating and re-appropriating, is a fundamentally artistic exercise. But it is also a fundamentally Christian practice.

Christianity is a faith of becoming present within people's languages, their dress, their food—and transfiguring the form and shape of these things. Christianity is a pentecostal faith that resists being bound to the grammars of one language, seeking to find itself perpetually expressed in the stranger so that old words might be heard in new ways.

Prophetic creativity does not allow us to receive old teachings passively. It requires us to walk through the streets, hearing and seeing one another, so that our dissonance and our discordant harmonies might preach.

This week we read in Deuteronomy of God's exhortations to Israel to resist the idolatry of the land they will enter—and of God's promise to call a prophet from among them. I wonder who will be the prophets in our own moment. Who will call us to see the ways our lives are bent around profane poles made by human hands?