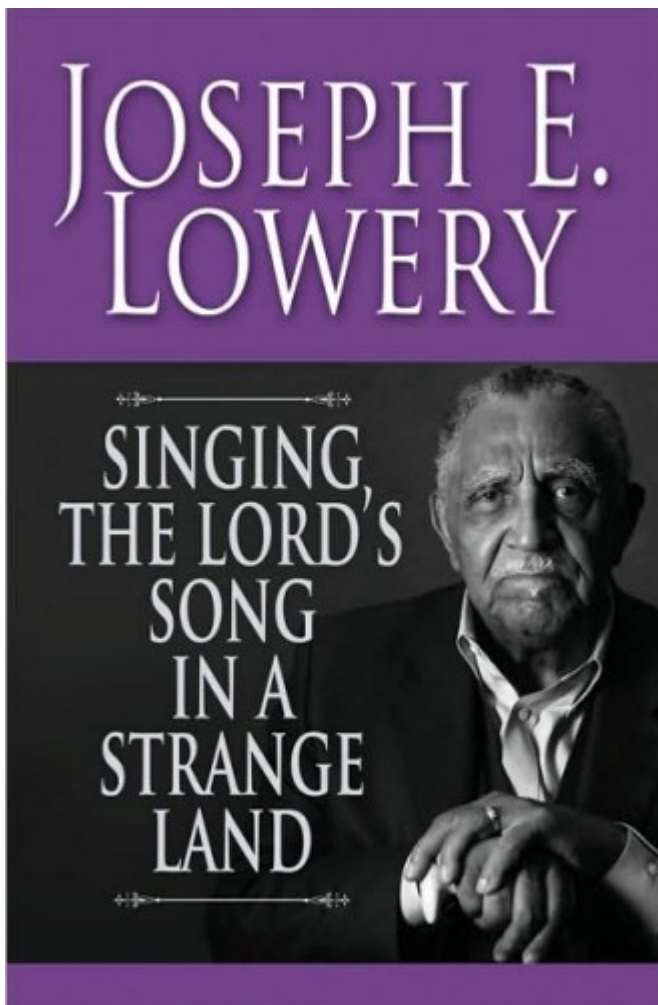


Singing the Lord's Song in a Strange Land, by Joseph E. Lowery

reviewed by [Walter Brueggemann](#) in the [February 22, 2011](#) issue

In Review



Singing the Lord's Song in a Strange Land

By Joseph E. Lowery
Abingdon

Joseph Lowery is a survivor of the civil rights movement, a compelling Methodist preacher and a fearless advocate for the underdog. He enjoys a celebrity status partly because of his puckish benediction at the Obama inauguration, which included the memorable phrase referring to the day "when yellow will be mellow." He has written a modest memoir that provides fresh, concrete data on the movement and his defining role in it.

This fairly random collection of sermons, essays and addresses gives access to Lowery's cadences of freedom, his willingness to dare and his refusal to give in on whatever justice issue was in front of him. The collection includes old pieces—old sermons and addresses that he seemed to give everywhere as an itinerant. It includes as well contemporary reflections on a life of faithful courage, which he recounts with justifiable pride and a liberated sense of humor. The volume is a fitting manifesto deriving from a life well lived that will aid us in remembering our public history of injustice and the courageous response to overcome it. His record makes clear that public change can be effected, but not on the cheap.

Good black preacher that he is, Lowery is an artistic phrase maker. In his retirement he is part of a group that calls itself Chaplains of the Common Good. They nudge the nation toward the common good in a way that is faithful to Martin Luther King's legacy of nonviolence. Lowery has been just such a nudger his whole life, variously concerned with the minimum wage, capital punishment, black drivers for Coca Cola, black-owned businesses, and on and on.

Lowery recounts his role with King and Fred Shuttlesworth in the turbulent days of the movement and his leadership in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. He reports on a libel suit that he, Ralph Abernathy and Fred Shuttlesworth lost after they criticized Alabama governor John Patterson in print—a suit that led to the confiscation of his car. He has harsh words for five Supreme Court justices—"three white males, one white female, and a whatchamacallhim," his dismissive tag for Clarence Thomas. And he has a critical word for George W. Bush's secretary of state "Condaleezy," who got her politics "so messed up."

Lowery's is a life that has been "crazy," but it is a "good crazy," the kind of good crazy that heals the world. As recently as 2007, he wrote:

The same God who was with Shadrach, Meschach, and Abednego, that same God is here today. Somethin' crazy may be happening in this country. Oh, Lord!

There is something in the atmosphere, and I believe we are on the cusp of something we've never seen before. Keep watching. Something crazy just may happen in this country!

In a society marked by violence, mean-spirited parsimony and greed, the large-spirited citizenship of Lowery is testimony that we can embrace. This quick read concerns grace-filled courage and clear-eyed faith. Lowery knows that we are seduced into forgetting, and he is determined that that should not happen.