

Joining in song (Isaiah 52:7-10; Psalm 98; Hebrews 1:1-12)

Sometimes someone else has to start singing before we can.

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December 20, 2021

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I am often a tired, grumpy, and hangry mother by the time our family sits down for dinner. My husband, seemingly unaffected by blood-sugar fluctuations or by the demands of the day, offers a perky question: "Shall we sing?"

Often I do not answer. I look down at the table, annoyed, wishing he would just offer a quick, spoken word of grace. In my silence, the kids half-heartedly assent: "sure." They begin singing, and a few bars in I join them, begrudgingly.

But then, more often than not, that wondrous thing happens: my heart is lifted to a new place. I stare at the candle in our midst, unable to even look at faces, and what began in silent bitterness turns toward gratitude. I taste peace through the words even before the food has done its physiological work. I see anew the goodness before me and all around me, illuminated in simple prayer and song.

Yet, almost as remarkably, it is a struggle to remember this from night to night. I still do not want to start singing on my own accord. At that hour, someone else must begin for me.

In all the celebrations of the nativity in 2021, I wonder how many deeply hungry and angry people will be gathered with us, around our tables at church and in homes. How many will need to be led, gently, to open their eyes to the light that has not been overcome by the darkness?

Our Christmas scriptures and gatherings are filled with enthusiastic voices saying, “Shall we sing?”

- “Your sentinels lift up their voices, together they sing for joy . . . Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem” (Isaiah 52:7-8).
- “O sing to the Lord a new song . . . Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises. Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre . . . and the sound of melody. With trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise . . . Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy (Psalm 98:1-9).
- And then, of course, there are all the carols and hymns of the season, which will be offered up in most liturgies even when the invitations of Psalm 98 and the Isaiah readings are dropped.

With all these invitations to song, it is worth reflecting on the source of singing, the reason that some (not yet all) are moved to raise their voices. In all of these texts, it’s about witnessing, seeing, recognizing the goodness of God’s presence or action:

- “For in plain sight they see the return of the LORD to Zion. . . . The LORD has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God” (Isaiah 52:8, 10).
- “The LORD has made known his victory; he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations . . . All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God” (Psalm 98:2-3).
- “He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being” (Hebrews 1:3).

As a pastor and friend through the pandemic, I have learned that the light of God, the presence of God-with-us, has looked very different to people in this pandemic season of vast darkness and many deaths. It is worth asking people: Where has God been glimpsed? Where has God showed up in your life, as unexpected as in the feedbox on that first morning in Bethlehem? As a word of truth or love, or as the weighty glory of unchanged silence in a world that seems to be unraveling like old

clothing (Hebrews 1:10-12)?

Some present will not have an answer; they will need to stare at the candle for a while and listen before they can join in. Yet others are ready to share their small light, to sing the first note, shakily or with exuberance. We do need people to testify to the light, and they are still among us, touched by Christ's oil of gladness. Do not be afraid, weary ones. There will be voices this Christmas who can lead us all into song.