

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“Someone once asked me why people sing. I answered that they sing for many of the same reasons the birds sing. They sing for a mate, to claim their territory, or simply to give voice to the delight of being alive in the midst of a beautiful day. Perhaps more than the birds do, humans hold a grudge. They sing to complain of how grievously they have been wronged, and how to avoid it in the future. They sing to help themselves execute a job of work. They sing so the subsequent generations won't forget what the current generation endured, or dreamed, or delighted in.”¹

Recently, I caught a documentary on the singer Linda Ronstadt, “The Sound of My Voice” -- and this quote has stuck with me since. In a short paragraph, she captures so beautifully the essence of music – in nature, and, in particular, in human experience. As I considered the words of Psalm 40 today – “he put a NEW SONG in my mouth, a song of praise to our God” – it struck me that Ronstadt could've just as easily been describing the psalms.

The fourth century bishop, Athanasius, pointed out that, while most of the Scripture speaks to us, ***the Psalms speak for us***. Centuries later, John Calvin described the Psalter as “an anatomy of all parts of the soul, for there is not an emotion of which anyone can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror.”²

¹ [Linda Ronstadt: the Sound of My Voice](#). Motion Picture. 2009. Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman, dir.

² Calvin, John. [Commentary on the Psalms, Vol. 1](#). Public Domain, various publishers.

“Lord, open our lips,” the psalmist says in Psalm 85: “and our mouth shall proclaim your praise.” These words serve as the opening acclamation, or responsory, in the daily Morning Prayer service found in the Book of Common Prayer – the service we observe Monday through Friday at 8 am in the Chapel. Beside the Confession of Sin, which is optional, it’s as if these are intended to be the very first words we say upon waking up – an exclamation from the heart that serves to set the tone for the upcoming day.

In his book, reflections on the psalms, C.S. Lewis wrote this: “The most valuable thing the Psalms do for me is to express that same delight which made David dance ... Against [the merely dutiful ‘church-going’] it stands out as something astonishingly robust, virile, and spontaneous; something we may regard with an innocent envy and may hope to be infected by as we read.”³

Psalms are poems, Lewis writes, but poems intended to be sung – there is a sense that the psalms are a gift in the whole canon of scripture because these are the texts that so vividly speak of our own experience of suffering, joy, and all of the variations of human experience. They are sometimes, like us, ill-tempered, self-centered, even vindictive – but always, they come back around to recognize that “even now, even in this situation, God is there, and God is faithful.”

The psalms, and the hymns inspired by them, are meant to live with us, in our everyday lives. This is why they are really the backbone of our daily prayer – sometimes, as humans, it is hard to know how to praise God. And even more, it is

³ C.S. Lewis. Reflections on the Psalms. Harcourt, Brace & Co.: New York, 1958, pp. 44-53.

hard to see that God is present even in deep anguish, in the lowest moments of our lives.

We sing in church not because it's pretty, or because some people like to sing and therefore they want to impose it upon everyone else. My liturgics professor, James Farwell, used to say that the default setting of liturgy is SING liturgy – when we speak the words of prayer and praise in our worship, it is the EXCEPTION and not the rule. When we speak, we are relating our thoughts; when we sing, we are using our whole selves – music helps us to embody those things which we otherwise cannot express.

There is much, of course, I could say about singing – how psychologists have come to believe that it is beneficial to our mental and physical wellbeing. Some anthropologists have argued that humans are not speaking animals that sometimes sing, but rather singing animals who have learned to speak. I wonder sometimes: is our timidity around singing a product of our contemporary age? The singer David Byrne pointed out, in a 2006 article in *Wired* magazine,⁴ something that has stuck with me since: that prior to the invention of recorded music, hearing a performance of music was, for most people, a rare occurrence. Only the very wealthy, really, ever heard music performed at a level that we might recognize as “professional.” And, even then, it was limited to very special occasions.

On my phone, I have an app that lets me instantly listen to – if I wished – potentially millions of professionally-recorded songs – including Gregorian chant,

⁴ Byrne, David. “David Byrne’s Survival Guide for Emerging Artists – and Megastars.” 12 December 2007. *Wired Magazine*. Web: <https://www.wired.com/2007/12/ff-byrne/> accessed 1/18/2020.

which for centuries provided the musical expression of our Western liturgy. I wonder if, in the past century, we've become circumspect about singing with our whole selves – because we have compared ourselves to the world-class singers and musicians who are now instantly available and ubiquitous.

For Christians, music is a way in which we proclaim the glory of God – how we tell this story, again and again, to one another. We are commanded, again and again, to sing praise to the Lord. Why? Because he has done marvelous things!

In the coming months, the music search committee will be doing the work of identifying music leadership for the future – ultimately, to call a music minister and organist to serve this congregation for the long term. We are in an information gathering phase at the present moment – each member of the committee is bringing their own ideas to the table, and hopefully within weeks or a couple of months we will have a fuller picture of what we need in music leadership. I hope you will take time to share with members of the committee what you see as priorities for music at Saint Alban's going forward.

Music, for me, is an essential part of worship – in fact, I've often wondered, if I would be a Christian at all if it weren't for music. During the hardest times of my life, the hymns I learned as a child were there – and the comfort and strength they have brought me through good times and bad were really a saving grace.

When you sing today, I invite you direct these prayers to God – to close your eyes, and to feel what it's like to praise God through song. No, it doesn't matter if you are a good singer – let it pour from you, as we lift our prayer to God. In liturgy, we are supported by one another – when I don't feel like I know if I believe it, then

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the person beside me, praying, can lift me up by believing for me. I think music functions in a similar way. Perhaps we aren't all soloists, and perhaps we aren't all likely to be diehard choir members. But we can lift one another up, raising our spirits, as we lift our song to our God. Amen.