

Sing Out

Rev. John Allen

The Bible is full of music. Stories of the Song's of Angels echoing across heaven, women breaking out tambourines and singing with joy after the Israelites escape across the Red Sea. The prophet Isaiah calls on the mountains and the forests to sing God's praises. And Jesus tells his detractors that if all the people were silent, then the stones would sing.

And today's reading comes from the time when the Temple in Jerusalem was finally completed, King David is giving instructions to the Priests who will tend to the temple, and one of the first instructions he gives them is this.

Sing! Sing to God! Praise God! "Sing, Sing to the Lord, all the earth. Tell of God's salvation forever! Declare God's glory to all people!"

Sing! Sing! Sing!

If we wanted to look at all the Bible passages about singing ,the scripture reading would have taken the whole service. It's everywhere.

I can tell you this, without a doubt. The Bible wants us to sing!

So it's a good thing that we are right in the middle of singing season in Boston.

Do you know about singing season?

It's that wonderful time of year when most nights, about 35,000 people gather at Fenway Park. Now I know that most people are not there to sing. But when the 7th inning rolls around, they will all dutifully stand up, and about half of them will sing along as the organist plays take me out to the ball game.

But at the end of the 8th. That is when the real magic happens.

Who knows why. But that is when everyone sings Sweet Caroline.

And if you have ever been there, and heard the sound of all 35,000 voices in unison singing Oh Oh Oh! and So Good So Good So Good! You know that it is quite the experience.

But for most folks around here, after October ends and the tarp is pulled over the field for the winter, they may not sing with a group again until the Spring.

Of course it wasn't always like that. Communal singing was once a much greater part of American life. Something that friends might do when they were together, something that was a part of about every civic function, every large gathering. People would come together and sing.

But for now it seems like we have largely relegated the experience to the ballpark...

I was once at a church service where there were no instruments. So we all had to make the music ourselves. Just about 20 of us standing in a circle, being asked to sing.

I can see some of you squirming at the thought of it.

I actually like singing, and even I was feeling pretty uncomfortable.

The man who was leading us started us in, and the response was, shall we say, tepid.

No-one sung too loudly, because we didn't actually want to be heard. We each wanted to start softly, so that we could play it safe, and make sure that we didn't embarrass ourselves by being too enthusiastic.

A few notes in, our leader cut us off.

He let the silence hang in the air for a moment, and then he said:

“If anyone ever told you you can’t sing. They were lying to you. You can sing. So sing out!”

That was it, he started us up again, and it was beautiful.

And when I say beautiful I don’t mean to say that it was flawless, or even in tune. There were mistakes, and I think my voice cracked on one of the higher notes.

Our breaths were all over the place. Our diction was sloppy.

But it was beautiful. The experience was beautiful. Because when each of us decided to sing out rather than hold back, we gave ourselves over to one another in a way that shifted the whole energy of the room.

We started out, so uncertain. Doubting ourselves. Feeling self-conscious.

And we ended up feeling joyful. Trusting each other. Feeling conscious of our connection with one another, and dare I say even conscious of God.

All because Patrick told us.

Sing out.

In 2013, researchers at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden, led by a man named Bjorn Vickhoff decided to test a hypothesis.

They theorized that singing might have health benefits.

After all, all cultures sing, music tends to be relaxing, it helps keep our lungs strong.

So to start out their study, they brought in a High School choir from a nearby town and hooked them all up to all manner of machines.

EKGs to monitor their hearts, EEG machine to monitor brainwaves, cameras that would sense changes in skin temperature. You name it, they had it covered.

And once the kids were all hooked up, they had them stand and sing through their repertoire.

Some of the results were just as they expected. As the choir began to sing together, heart rates slowed. The students were relaxed. The patterns of activity on their various monitors became more regular.

But there was one outcome that stunned the researchers.

A moment into the song all the singers heartbeats started to synchronize with each other.

In fact, they tested it again and again, and every time it took just a few seconds, before the indecipherable jumble on the heart monitors

started to line up up into an orderly series of uniform peaks, and across the whole choir their hearts were beating as one.

And so there it was, proof, in the pages of a scientific journal, that how my heart felt that was was not my imagination. When we finally let our guards down, we connected. In a way that we never had before.

I don't know if the research has ever been conducted at this scale. But I suppose it follows that next time the Sox are at Fenway, and everyone is belting out Sweet Caroline without any trepidation at all, all their hearts will start to beat together. 30,000 hearts. In sync. Because of a song. Can you imagine such a thing?

—

Mary Luti, a colleague of mine from my last church, used to teach at Andover Newton Theological School. In 1990, 3 members of faculty

and the president of the school all died, each quickly, and each unexpectedly.

At the President George Peck's funeral, they decided to sing all his favorite hymns, including A Mighty Fortress Is Our God. Unfortunately for Mary, she had always hated that hymn. She thought it was too old fashioned, the idea of a bunch of helpless people, hopeless until Christ swooshes down, as she says "like a Holy Swashbuckler" to rescue us all.

But on that day. Besieged by death, exhausted by grief, and living with the "scary realization that we were powerless against the onslaught of Death." Mary said, "I needed some swooping and some swashbuckling. So I took a deep breath and belted out that embarrassing old hymn. I sang it like I loved it. Like I'd always loved it. Like I really believed it. I sang it with all my heart."

I've got to just tell you the end of this story in her words, the way that only she could.

“And then it happened.” Mary said. “When we got to the part about demons snatching us, we felt those claws grab at us, and we started trembling. When we sang about God sending Christ to help us, and we felt a mighty Presence swoosh into the room. When we sang that God is a mighty fortress, protective steel descended. You could actually hear it clang down. The more we sang, the more the demons ran. To this day, I remember the way we climbed on the pews, thrust our fists in the air, and ordered the forces of death to back off.

... Okay, I lied. We didn't applaud. Nobody stood on the pews. We didn't thrust our fists in the air. But we did sing. We sang and sang. And, somehow, because we sang, we won.”

I'm with Mary. I know that some of the songs we sing here at church are a little dusty, they seem to be of another age. And plenty of them are definitely overdue for some updated lyrics.

But like her I have also met the power of these songs first hand. Even when I trip over the words, or miss a note, sacred songs make our hearts beat in time with one another. And they make our hearts beat in time with the presence of the living God.

Hey but don't take my word for it, we've got a few more chances in this service to test the theory for ourselves.

We won't hook anyone up to heart monitors. But see if you can feel it.

One final word of admonition from me.

“If anyone ever told you you can't sing. They were lying to you. You can sing. So sing out!”