

SING TO THE LORD A NEW SONG

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Since it's Fourth of July weekend, it makes sense to start with a story from American history. The hit musical "Hamilton" includes a song called "*Yorktown: The World Turned Upside Down*;" the song is about the decisive victory Washington's troops won at the Battle of Yorktown. In the musical, Hamilton sings the story:

"We negotiate the terms of surrender

I see George Washington smile

We escort their men out of Yorktown

They stagger home single file

Tens of thousands of people flood the streets

There are screams and church bells ringing

And as our fallen foes retreat

I hear the drinking song their singing...

And the chorus sings: "*The world turned upside down.*" (Miranda, *Hamilton*, "Yorktown")

I'm telling you this story not because it's a catchy number from a musical, but because this actually happened. It was common for soldiers, in the thrill of victory or the agony of defeat, to sing as they marched in and out of towns and forts. "The World Turned Upside Down" was in fact a folk song the British troops sang in lament as they marched out of Yorktown, and of course it was appropriate, for somehow that ragtag army of patriots was turning the world upside down as they fought and defeated the most powerful military force in the world.

It's not uncommon for soldiers and onlookers to write songs in times of war—Yankee Doodle is the most familiar example from the Revolutionary War, and the same thing happened in other wars in our history. The Battle Hymn of the Republic was a product of the Civil War; God Bless America was the ballad of the World War era. And if this

seems like something that only could have happened in our country's distant history, consider the countless number of folk and rock songs from the 60s and 70s that referenced Vietnam, or the tremendous resurgence of God Bless America since 2001.

Songs are always present in times of war and that phenomenon is not unique to America. Biblical scholars tell us that perhaps the oldest words in all of Scripture come from the story of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea, escaping slavery under Pharaoh. At that moment, when they celebrate the freedom God has given them from Pharaoh's army, Moses' sister Miriam writes a song: "Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea." (Exodus 15)

This is what people do. When human beings are searching for meaning, we create things. We write songs. We paint pictures and build monuments. We write stories and poems. Creativity is how people grieve, how we remember, and how we celebrate. Certainly war itself is not something to be celebrated, but the songs are common because of the belief and hope that the struggle was worth something. People sing because of the need to find meaning in the struggle.

Far beyond wartimes, human beings use songs to celebrate courage, inspire bravery and drive change—to turn the world upside down. That's why it is so common in the pages of the Bible to find words like the ones of Psalm 96: "O Sing to the Lord a new song!" God gives us music to call us beyond where we are to new places, and to help us believe that the world can be different than it is. When the Hebrews were enslaved in Egypt making bricks without straw, they couldn't believe that they could possibly be set free. When the American colonists were paying exorbitant taxes on tea and housing British soldiers in peacetime, many of them couldn't possibly believe they might overthrow their oppressors. So when the impossible came into being, they marked what was happening by singing songs.

In the Bible, the search for meaning in song happens in all kind of human circumstances:

- Having lived through personal struggle, Psalmists sing about God bringing them up from the pit " *You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, so that my soul may praise you and not remain silent (Psalm 30).*
- Biblical people sing about hope in a peaceful future " *The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.*" (Isaiah 11)
- Biblical people sing to grieve and acknowledge the brevity of life: " *O Lord, make me to know the measure of my days on earth; the grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.* (Psalm 39, Isaiah 40)

- And biblical people sing to celebrate love: *“Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth, the time of singing has come (Song of Songs 2:10-12)*

The sum of what I am arguing today is this: if you’ve ever wondered why we’re always asking you to sing here at church, there’s a good reason, and we didn’t just make it up. Church is supposed to be a place where people can come to believe that God is with them in the midst of the movements of life: that God understands struggle, that a better life is possible, and that God takes pleasure in the good gifts we enjoy. So we sing about things God has done for us in the past. We sing about the new truths Jesus taught to his disciples. We sing about the mission of the church in the world. We sing ourselves into richer and fuller ways of being and inspire one another to a better life.

Paul Vasile is here this morning because he believes in these things. In particular, he believes that they are most often achieved when the people in the pews are the ones doing the singing. Choirs and bands are a fixture in Christian worship, especially at a place like Knox, where we are blessed with such a rich musical tradition. But if we let the people in front or in back do all of the work, we miss out on the chance to participate in this amazing historical truth—the creative power of the human voice. And whether you’re a classically trained performer or feel like you can barely carry a tune, we want you to share in it. So Paul travels all over the country helping not choirs, but congregations, to sing.

So we’re asking you to sing this morning, a lot. There’s no choir, except among you in the pews. You’re being asked to sing the Offertory as you pass the plate and share your gifts, and the Communion Anthem as you share the bread and the cup with one another. And as you do so, as you sing and you listen, I invite you to give some thought to the idea that singing is what people do when they are longing for change in their lives, when something in the world is being turned upside down. So what are you hoping to see change in your life or in the world around you? Perhaps it’s an issue of justice, a problem of poverty or inequality in our community. Perhaps it’s the difficulty of our political environment, in which case it’s an especially cool thing that here at church, people of different viewpoints can still get together and sing a song. Maybe it’s something more immediate and personal to you—a broken relationship that needs to get better, an illness or addiction that is in need of healing, a person you love about whom you are worried. Perhaps it’s a joy—maybe you haven’t exactly thought about it lately but you are deeply blessed with much to be thankful for. Perhaps you know yourself to be so blessed that you might just have to sing a song. Whatever it is, I invite you today: “Sing to the Lord a new song.” Amen.