

### Stewardship of Our Song

So, if a tree sings in the forest, and no one is there to hear it, does the tree still sing? According to the psalmist, yes! And I don't find that at all hard to believe. Have you ever heard a pine tree sing? You have if you've been to Rocky Mountain Mennonite Camp! Or for us Kansans, how about a cottonwood tree?

And not just the trees sing, according to this psalm. The field, and everything in it. The sea, and all that fills it. The heavens. And, all the earth. Singing is all of creation's response to its Creator.

"O sing to the Lord a new song," the psalmist urges us. Why a "new song?" Why is this important? I asked the Wednesday evening Bible study group that question. They came up with some really good answers. I think it was Vern Zielke who said that sometimes the old songs grow stale and tired. And so a new song is sometimes needed to restore our singing to its very best. And God deserves our very best, wouldn't you say? Sharon Pauls suggested that sometimes we humans lose our way, get off track, and a new song can help us repent, turn around, find our way back to God.

I would propose that singing new songs to the Lord is a matter of stewardship. Of making good use of the gifts God has given us. Of celebrating the fact that we share our Creator God's gift of creativity. As I've been discovering these last months, there are hundreds—and it's safe to say, thousands—of wonderful new hymns out there, just waiting to be sung. We're singing some of them today. And hundreds more are being written, perhaps even as I speak. Songs inspired by the Holy Spirit to help us praise God, to bring a prophetic word to our world, to celebrate our unity and harmony as God's creatures. As well as our diversity.

Faithful stewardship of our song makes it incumbent on us to find these new songs, and then to sing them.

But faithful stewardship is equally about making good use of what we have already been given. Our wonderful, beloved, tried and true hymn repertoire, like we have in *Hymnal: a Worship Book*, and the brown hymnal before that, and the blue one before that. How can we not continue to sing hymns like "Great as thy faithfulness," written in 1923, even as we learn to sing and appreciate "Great is your faithfulness," written in 2003, with fresh words in a contemporary idiom? This is why the "Mennonite Worship and Song Committee will be generally following a 1:1 ratio, keeping roughly 50% old hymns, as we strive to find 50% new songs.

Clearly we have a formidable job facing us. But we also have lots of help. Hundreds of people have already filled out the "Heart Songs" survey on Menno Media's web site. I urge every one of you to fill it out. Especially if you want to have input in what goes into the next hymnal. (Of course I'm always open to bribes . . . I mean, suggestions. Written on a \$20 bill. \$50, even better.)

This morning's psalm, Psalm 96, actually gives us lots of help and guidance. "O sing to the Lord a new song." I've already talked about the importance of finding "new songs" for us to sing. "Sing to the Lord, all the earth." I've also talked about how broad and inclusive the psalmist's exhortation to sing is. "All the earth." And so we will want to include at least a few songs that represent the wonderful diversity of God's people. Songs sung in Guarani and Arabic.

Spanish and German. Native American worship songs. Lutheran and Catholic. J.S. Bach. Marty Haugen. Gay and straight.

The psalmist exhorts us to bless God's name. And he or she gives us at least three of those names: God. King. LORD. Which is all in caps, reminding us it is a stand-in for another of God's names, Yahweh. And so it is important that our hymns make use of God's many names. Names like Creator. Savior. Father. Mother. To name just four more, out of a myriad.

The writer of Psalm 96 tells us who our God is, by listing some of his attributes and characteristics. Using such words as Glory. Marvelous. Great. Honor. Majesty. Strength. Righteous. So should our songs declare these very attributes. Along with many, many more.

The psalmist reminds us that there is only one God, capital G. And that all other gods, small g, are idols. And so our hymns should also remind us that there is only one true God. "Holy, holy, holy." That—if we're honest—our daily lives are all too easily filled with false idols.

The author of Psalm 96 proclaims that the Lord is Creator of all that is. And so our songs should proclaim the beauty of God's creation, and should name the plethora of the Creator's flora and fauna: trees; flowers; birds of the air; fish of the sea; animals of the field. Dogs. Cats. Lions. Leviathan.

The psalmist tells us that God is like a king. A king whose reign is firmly established, stable, to be trusted. A king whose job is justice. A heavenly judge whose measure is equity, whose standard is righteousness and truth. And so our hymns should be all about God's justice and peace, all about the right relationships to which God continually calls us. Can you think of hymns which do that? Let's keep them or put them in the next hymnal!

The writer of Psalm 96 uses a wide variety of verbs to describe acts of worship: sing, bless, tell, declare, praise, revere, bring (as in, our offerings), tremble, be glad, rejoice. So too should our hymns and songs encourage us to worship in a wide variety of ways, and with a wide range of feelings and emotions.

The psalmist encourages his people to "tell of God's salvation from day to day." And so in our hymns we should tell stories about the many ways in which God has saved us, and is saving us, and will save us. Our hymns should remind us that God's kingdom is past, present, future. The Lord is coming. He will judge the world with righteousness.

The psalmist commands all peoples and families to "ascribe to the Lord." A great verb for Stewardship Sunday! Ascribe connotes giving, as in, giving to God the credit where credit is due, giving God thanks for all of his and her marvelous works. Giving God the glory. Think of how many hymns use the word "glory" in reference to God. "To God be the glory" (HWB 102) "Blessing and honor and glory" (108)/ "All glory be to God on high" (122). "Glory be to the Father" (127)/ "God of grace and God of glory" (366). Let's add some more!

Another of those is HWB 646, "O Splendor of God's glory bright." Hey, our psalmist used the word "splendor!" Remember? Verse 9 "Worship the Lord in holy splendor," he writes. When I think of splendor I think of Bach. Beethoven. Four-part *a capella* singing. 606. Orchestral instruments. Pipe organ. Steinway piano. Worship band. Complete with guitar, electric bass, drums, and as the psalmist says elsewhere, loud, crashing cymbals.

It's all in this one book. Just as it will be in the next one to come. May God bless and guide the process. And may the stewardship of our song honor God in return.

Amen.

