

January 19, 2020
“A New Song”
Psalm 40:1-11
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Some of you may have seen in the *Inquirer* a few weeks ago, or otherwise know, the story of Henry Brown. Born into slavery around 1815, in Virginia. The article picks up in 1849 when he is still enslaved, and his wife and three children have been sold away to a plantation in North Carolina.

In Henry’s words: “My agony was now complete, she with whom I had traveled the journey of life in chains . . . and the dear little pledges God has given us I could see plainly must now be separated from me forever, and I must continue, desolate and alone, to drag my chains through the world.”

In the face of such terror and trauma, Henry Brown devised a plan to escape. With the help of a freed black friend and a sympathetic white shoemaker, the article goes on, he had a box built. About 3 x 2 feet wide and 2.5 feet high, with three small holes drilled for air.

On the morning of March 29, 1849, Henry Brown climbed into that box and had himself shipped—carrying only a small flask of water and an awl in case he needed more air holes. From wagon to train to steam ship.

“I felt my eyes swelling as though they would burst from their sockets, and the veins on my temples were dreadfully distended with pressure of blood upon my head,” he later wrote. “I felt a cold sweat coming over me that seemed to be warning that death was about to terminate my earthly miseries.”

From steamer back to a wagon in Washington, DC, he was knocked “insensible” at one point, then onto another train to take him, finally, to his destination in Philadelphia. After 27 hours in the box, Henry Brown arrived battered but intact, delivered to the office of a Quaker abolitionist.

And when he emerged, when he tasted freedom for the first time in his life, he started singing. Psalm 40. “I waited patiently for the Lord, he inclined to me and heard my cry.

He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure. He put a new song in my mouth.”

A new song.

Now I want to say here that while Henry Brown’s story is certainly a powerful example of the resiliency of the human spirit in the face of the harshest circumstances, it is not some trite story about making lemonade when life hands you lemons. To see it that way would be to ignore his experience of extraordinary suffering and injustice, not to mention the whole brutal history of slavery and white supremacy racism in this country.

And not to mention the rest of his own life. We do know that Henry “Box” Brown went on to become a popular entertainer, using his own experience (including this experience of shipping himself in a box) to mock and resist racist ideas and, the article goes on to say, “push(ing) wildly against the boundaries that circumscribed his life as a black man.” But we also know, of course, that the boundaries were still there. He still lived, though technically free, within the confines of a deeply racist society. And carrying tremendous pain.

His story is not about lemons and lemonade. It’s about deeply felt lament and deeply felt thanksgiving. Thanksgiving and lament.

In Psalm 40, God hears and sets the feet of the psalmist on a rock, on solid ground, and puts a “new song” in the psalmist’s mouth. Other translations have it that God offers “a new song to sing.”

Scholars confirm that this Hebrew phrase translated as “new song,” *sheer hadash*, is only found in the Psalter in five other places. Biblical scholar Nancy deClaisse’-Walford suggests that our best insight into its meaning is found in the only place where the phrase is found outside of the Psalms, in Isaiah 42—the second of four so-called “servant songs” in the book of Isaiah.

There, she writes, “the ‘new song’ marks a new beginning, a radical change from what has come before.” The singer of Psalm 40 celebrates a new beginning emerging—quite

literally in Henry Brown's case—from the old. A new song as metaphor for new life. Thanksgiving FOLLOWING lament.

And, as the pattern in Psalm 40 continues, lament FOLLOWING thanksgiving. Scholars suggest it may originally have been two different psalms: verses 1-10 a typical hymn of thanksgiving, and verses 11-17 a lament.

But that is also the overall pattern of all 150 Psalms taken together, expressing honestly and often dramatically the full range of human experience. The soaring highs and the devastating lows. The blessed assurances and the crippling doubts.

Consider Psalm 23. Most of us are familiar with its profound and poetic imagery of comfort and peace: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. God makes me lie down in green pastures, and leads me beside still waters. God restores my soul." But then consider Psalm 22, immediately preceding, which begins: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" A phrase, of course, that Jesus echoes on the cross. "Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?" The divine presence, at times can feel so intimately near and at times so desperately out of reach.

Reflecting back on the first verse of Psalm 40, "I waited patiently for the Lord; (God) inclined to me and heard my cry,"—theologically speaking, I resist the notion of some distant, ambivalent God who may or may not hear our cries, who may or may not incline toward us, but I get that it can feel that way. The Psalms capture well the intensity of that feeling, of feeling lost and of feeling found.

But the same God who is in the green pastures and in the still waters is also in the desolate pit. In the miry bog. And in the tears. God, who is the very source of life and love, is with and within us, and intends life and love for all of us.

When you're in the desolate pit or the miry bog, patience is not some passive waiting for rescue, but an active determination rooted in that divine desire woven into creation. In the trust that we deserve goodness and abundance. Patience is rooted in the steadfast hope, hope against sometimes fragile hope, that new life is always possible. And that it is worth waiting for.

Many of the Psalms are attributed to David, but we don't actually know who wrote them. We might assume, given the striking contrast between Psalm 22 and Psalm 23, for example, that we're talking here about two different authors. But the truth is, it could just as easily be the same person. Right?

Thanksgiving and lament. Lament and thanksgiving. That is the Psalter. That was the story of the ancient Israelites. And that is our story. The full collection of Psalms expresses what our lived and felt experience confirms, that thanksgiving and lament are bookends of our lives—sometimes alternating, and sometimes simultaneous, realities. Joy, then pain, then joy again. Joy and pain which we often hold and carry together.

Sometimes, as in Psalm 40 and as for Henry Brown, our joy, our thanksgiving, our praise, our gratitude comes in direct response to a particular experience. We give thanks because we experience the goodness and abundance of divine intention. We have been reminded, assured, of the divine presence.

But there is also a strong biblical witness to the need—and our capacity—to cultivate thanksgiving and gratitude even when we don't feel like it. To lead with praise, as our liturgy invites us to do each Sunday. 1 Thessalonians 5: “. . . pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

I have preached before at Calvary on gratitude as a spiritual discipline. Literally practicing gratitude to help us stay grounded in the goodness of God, the goodness of life, the goodness of our own lives. Expressing gratitude when you're up, and expressing gratitude when you're down. Expressing gratitude when you feel grateful, and expressing gratitude when you don't. Easier said than done, amen!

Far as the divine presence may sometimes feel in our lives, far as we may feel from any instinct for gratitude, there is always goodness at hand. The biblical narrative also reminds us of that when we need reminding.

Isaiah 55: “For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.” Goodness is built into the fabric of creation, the fabric of our very beings, if we stop to

notice. "Let everything that has breath praise the Lord," writes the psalmist elsewhere. Gratitude, and life itself, begins with the gift of breath. If you have nowhere else to start, start there.

Gratitude is also an act of resistance. Resistance against despair and hopelessness, against the feeling that the divine intention is not intended for you: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Giving thanks, even when we don't feel thankful, has a way of softening the heart. Offering praise has a way of opening the soul to possibility. To new life. To a new song.

And remember that the Psalms themselves were meant to be sung. We all know that music has the power to make us feel some kind of way. To feel what we NEED to feel. To feel what we WANT to feel.

"To sing is to pray twice," St. Augustine wrote.

"What makes us feel drawn to music," says Hazrat Inayat Khan, the founder of the Sufi Muslim Order in the West, "is that our whole being is music: our mind and body, the nature in which we live, the nature which has made us, all that is beneath and around us, it is all music."

We are the music, friends. To paraphrase the familiar quote, perhaps we are the new songs we've been waiting for. It is the divine desire that we be in tune with the very Source of life and love, in tune with each other and in tune with creation.

In this way, in a world so desperately out of tune, and even when our own lives may feel out of tune, we are invited to sing our way back into tune—metaphorically and literally—with and for our lives.

SING:

We are a gentle, angry people, and we are singing, singing for our lives.

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Some of you probably know that U2 has often used the song we sang earlier, based on the first three verses of Psalm 40, to close their concerts. As the band members leave the stage, one by one, the crowd continues to sing, "How long to sing this song?"

"40" was the 10th and final song on U2's album, "War." The 'how long' refrain is not taken from Psalm 40, but echoes the first song on the album, "Sunday, Bloody Sunday," which itself laments the horrific day of violence on January 30, 1972, during "the Troubles" in North Ireland, when 28 civilians were shot—half of them killed and many more injured—by British soldiers during a protest march. Refueling hostilities that continued until the Good Friday Agreement of 1998.

The song and the album end then, reflecting Psalm 40 and the Psalter as a whole, with the recognition that even as we sing a new song of life, the tired, old songs and patterns of death remain. It's a simple song of thanksgiving that also recognizes the ongoing brokenness of the world, and so the ongoing need to hold onto gratitude and the possibility—for ourselves, for each other, for the earth itself—of new life. A new world. To keep singing, and singing loudly to drown out the old songs. Arlo Guthrie, in his classic protest song, "Alice's Restaurant," reminds us that "if you wanna end war and stuff, you gotta sing loud."

To keep singing a new world into being and join our voices together in ever-new songs, in rhythm and harmony with God's divine song for us all. The answer to the rhetorical question, "How long to sing this song?" is up to us.

SING:

*Lift every voice and sing, till earth and heaven ring,
ring with the harmonies of liberty;
let our rejoicing rise high as the listening skies,
let it resound loud as the rolling sea.
Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us;
sing a song, full of the hope that the present has brought us.
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,
let us march on till victory is won.*

May it be so.