

A NEW SONG

A sermon preached at Westminster Presbyterian Church
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*Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous.
Praise befits the upright.
Praise the Lord with the lyre;
make melody to him with the harp of ten strings.
Sing to him a new song;
play skilfully on the strings, with loud shouts.*

*For the word of the Lord is upright,
and all his work is done in faithfulness.
He loves righteousness and justice;
the earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord.*

Psalm 33:1-5

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, 'Sir, we wish to see Jesus.' Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, 'The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor.

John 12:20-26

I want you to know how delighted I am to be with you today, and especially how glad my wife, Sam, and I are to be with our dear friend, Patrick, your pastor, as well as with Jenna and Emerson. Patrick and I met some years ago when he participated in a conference for emerging faith leaders that was held annually by Plymouth Congregational Church in Minneapolis, where I was Senior Minister. In the space of three days at that conference, I came to see the profound gifts that this

man has for ministry, and when it came time, some months later, to choose one of those young leaders to come and preach at Plymouth, Patrick was the obvious choice. And it was a great choice, for he touched our congregation not only with his theological insight, but with his eloquence, his earnestness, and his engaging manner. But I don't need to tell you this. You know. You know. You should know, as well, that in my conversations with Patrick over the last couple of years, he has spoken with pride and affection about this congregation and about how beautifully you have embraced his family. I am so glad that you found each other. So, thanks for welcoming me to your pulpit.

Now, onward. The Psalmist says, "Sing to the Lord a new song!" and Jesus says, "Very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies, it bears much fruit." Let's see what we can reap from these two passages. First, will you pray with me: Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be ever acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock, our Redeemer, and Friend. Amen.

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After I retired from active parish ministry in 2017, I realized that I was missing the experience of being with young faith leaders like Patrick and that I wanted, somehow, to continue supporting and encouraging them . . . as well as to learn from and be encouraged by them. When I speak of faith leaders, I don't just mean Christians, mind you, but progressive Jews, Muslims, and others as well. So I began working with Auburn Theological Seminary, late of this city, to do more of that, and a few months ago we received a \$1 million grant from the Eli Lilly Endowment to host 3-day gatherings of these emerging leaders in twenty cities around the country over the next five years. Many are young clergy, but there are lay leaders as well, all committed to doing the work of social justice through their local faith communities. Three gatherings have taken place already – in New York, San Francisco, and Atlanta. A fourth group meets in just a month, and others will follow throughout 2020 and beyond. I need to tell you that after 43 years in ministry, I can think of few projects that have been as exciting, as promising, and as profound for me as this one is proving to be. Oh, if you could listen in, as I have, to these conversations, you would share the deep admiration I have for these intrepid, smart, creative folk who are taking on the mantle of religious leadership in an era when religious institutions are changing rapidly and in some cases disintegrating altogether. My God, they're brave! And I'm enthralled with what this newer generation of leaders sees "out there, on the horizon" – let's say it's a 50-year horizon – for the life of faith and the practice of religion in America. And today I'm wondering what *you* see out ahead – say, for Westminster in fifty years, for the church as a whole, for religious life in our country – and how you feel about it. What's it going to be like? What do you *hope* it will be like? Just as important, I am wondering how it is for you *now* . . . how it is with you and God, with you and Christianity, with you and the changing church. I don't mean just in your head, but in your real life. Are you comfortable with it all? Questioning? Satisfied? Anxious? Excited? Curious? Stymied? I guess I've experienced all of those feelings. As for the future of religion, I think that in my 73rd year I'm listening for something faintly heard from a time I will not live to see . . . a hint, perhaps, of that "new song" that the Psalmist urges us to sing. The future of faith: it's a long conversation, but let me see if I can get it started.

We begin with Gustav Mahler. That's right . . . Mahler: the brilliant Viennese composer who died at age fifty in 1911. And yes, the early 1900's is an odd place to start when thinking about the

future to be sure, but bear with me! Mahler's late work, by most accounts, marked the end of the great symphonic arc that began with Mozart and Haydn a hundred and fifty years before. By the early days of the twentieth century, the height of Mahler's flower, the foundations of classical music were being rocked in a seismic, profound way. The great tradition of tonal music, of tonality itself, was giving way to a host of atonal experiments, most vividly represented by the work of Arnold Schoenberg and Igor Stravinsky but found also in traditional strains of pre-classical and non-Western music. To illustrate: in Mahler's time, *this* (organist plays an example of tonal music: 4 measures of Beethoven's "Pathétique" Sonata, 2nd movement) was giving way to *this* (organist plays an example of atonal music – 4 measures of Schoenberg's *Drei Klavierstücke*, opus 11) – tonality ceding ground to atonality. As Leonard Bernstein said so eloquently in his Norton lectures¹ at Harvard, Mahler's 9th Symphony, written shortly before he died, announced, with heart-rending pathos, the death of the old music; it was a "farewell" to long-standing musical traditions, and it was, for Mahler – whose health was fragile – also a farewell to life itself. Everything known in music was giving way to a new unknown. Mahler's 9th was an elegy for the old ways. And, of course, what was happening in music was happening in other fields as well: Freud in psychology, Einstein in physics, Picasso in painting . . . all heralded a wrenching deconstruction of the old world and a dis-orienting thrusting-forward of the new. Of course, there was resistance. I can easily imagine a traditionalist viewing Picasso for the first time, feeling saddened (or, more likely, offended) by his work, wanting to return to the old ways, and exclaiming, with righteous and nostalgic fervor, an anguished battle-cry: "Make Painting Great Again!" So, a similar response to Schoenberg's atonal forays. So, the same, to Einstein's bewildering quantum theories. A visceral longing for the old realities. But the very ground was shifting. These were no mere incremental changes. They were a huge cultural disruption. Nothing would be the same again. No way back. And beneath it all was the darkly haunting fear: that everything in human culture might be falling apart. That these profound discontinuities – in the arts, in science, in social mores – were really signaling the collapse of civilization. And from one perspective a twentieth century literally drenched in blood and wracked by chaos did little to abate those fears. But still, even through that pain-wracked century, human beings kept trying, kept holding to hope (how could we live without hope?) and – amazing! – some of the new ideas and developments that once seemed so threatening actually proved to be good soil for that hope. That soil gave us Chagall and Gershwin, Jonas Salk and Steven Hawking, Gandhi and King and Churchill. Maya Angelou and Alice Walker, the saving power of Alcoholics Anonymous and the moral grandeur of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation movement. The Beatles and the discovery of DNA and the Suffragettes. None of them would have been possible without the great disruption of Mahler's time, the passing away of the old order.

How do we understand religion in relation to all of this? We see in a glass darkly. We don't know. But I would venture this: A hundred years after Mahler, it may well be that it is now religion's turn to write our own version of the 9th Symphony: a farewell to the old ways of faith . . . and a hesitant openness to strange, new ways of belief and practice . . . ways that are not yet here but which may come. Now let's be honest. No one in their right mind who cares about religious life and religious communities – communities like this one – will suggest that this transition will be effected without authentic grief and real pain. Our religions, after all, are where we have always looked for *stability*, a rootedness in that which is eternal, so when *these* foundations shake it is especially terrifying. And let's be clear: when I speak of "new ways of faith," I do not mean things like contemporizing our worship, bringing in some new hymns, colloquializing our liturgies.

These are mere ripples on the surface of a deeply moving tide, an irresistible and elemental current. The new ways of faith of which we speak, the “new song” which the Psalmist enjoins represent a more profound change. They call for a foundational revolution of religious life: our language, our ideas about God, our moral practice, our very understanding of ourselves. Everything comes into question. And how can we help but wonder: will this new tide moving beneath us carry us to something new and beautiful . . . or to the Abyss? Will it be the end of faith or something glorious and unexpected? We cannot be sure. But make no mistake: the changes ahead are definitely *not* about “Making The Church Great Again.” They are more akin to what Jesus said: “Unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains alone, but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” We are not talking about restoration here, but about revolution.

In regard to theology, the contemporary philosopher Richard Kearney² put it this way: “After the terrors of Verdun, the traumas of the Holocaust, Hiroshima and the Gulags, to speak of God is an insult unless we speak in a new way.” All of post-Holocaust theology says the same: in the ash-covered aftermath of the crematoria, it is simply unacceptable to talk about God the way we used to. It is intellectually and spiritually dishonest, after the manifest tragedies of the twentieth century, and after the revolution of knowledge of that same century, to continue to speak of an all-powerful, benevolent God. But what, then? Is God dead? Kearny’s approach is interesting. He proposes that there may be an understanding of the Divine that comes after we let go of theism (the idea of God as a distinct, powerful, conscious being) and after we move past atheism (the rejection of the idea of God altogether). After theism and after atheism comes something which Kearney calls anatheism. This is not a return to the old God after rejecting God. It’s not a going back. It’s *not* “Make God Great Again!” It is, rather, a moving into the future to meet a God we cannot yet even imagine. That may appeal to you. It may not. But for any of us involved in the life of faith at this moment in history it means standing naked on the precipice of time, stripped of religion’s old consolations (a heaven to look forward to, a doctrine to hold onto, an institution to give allegiance to) and without yet being clothed in the new consolations which are still to come. But faith is the understanding, the conviction – or as Kearney would say, the *wager* – that new consolations *do* await us, that new truth will undergird us, that new communities will enfold us, and that new life will be stitched through with joy.

Let me go out on a limb here and suggest that many thoughtful Christians today no longer know what to make of the idea of God. It’s not that we deny the existence or presence of God – but rather that we have sailed out from the harbor of the God we knew and are on a voyage toward the God who is. The language of theism, which describes the God we grew up with – a being of omnipotence and apprehensible consciousness – is receding behind us. The language of atheism, which says there is simply nothing and no-one there, leaves our mouths dry, our souls parched. But ahead – ahead! – a horizon lined with the holy fire of a sun just rising . . . an expanse so unimaginably beautiful that even a hint of it breaks the heart . . . and in the end the utter joy of the journey in which God is not the goal but the very sea beneath us. God, we find after all, may not be a thing to be grasped, or a being to believe in, but a presence to be experienced. Again, I wonder what you think. For myself, I don’t think that God is dead. But I sense that God, in God’s great love for us, has taken from us of our old ways of understanding, taken our knowledge, taken our certainty so that we might once again be called out, there to stand in awe, and tremble, and, in the very end, be blessed.

That fiery horizon – the new religion, the new song – defies clear description and understanding at this point, but using equal measures of imagination, reason, memory (of which scripture is one element), and hope, it may be possible for us – in community – to make out the broad outlines of what is ahead. As Yogi Berra said, “It’s hard to make predictions, especially about the future.” Still, I wonder. Might the new song – the new faith – the new church – have these attributes?

Humility. In the new faith, might we finally acknowledge all of what we do not know? No more imperious suggestions that we have God figured out, pinned down, sized up, wrapped neatly in a creed or in some systematic theology. In the Greek Orthodox tradition, Mary, the mother of Jesus, was considered to be *khora akhoraton* – a container of the uncontainable. The new faith could be just that: a container for what we know is uncontainable.

Multi-lingualism. Instead of claiming that *our* language about God is the only language, or the best language, and instead of, on the other hand, roughly amalgamating all of the various faith traditions into a crude and useless spiritual Esperanto, could we engage in a rich, challenging, multi-lingual conversation about God and about our common life? Could we make it our business to know one another’s God-languages so that each of us might more clearly speak our own?

Integration. Oh, the psychic splits that have wounded us and our world! We pit body against soul, heaven against earth, darkness against light, sacred against mundane. Every time we divide them we wound ourselves. They aren’t *meant* to be divided! Might those splits, in a new faith, finally be healed? Might we see some new unity with them? Even the male/female split; is it possible, in fact, that our transgender and non-binary friends are prophets of this unifying truth?

Communalism. Has the Enlightenment focus on individualism finally reached its saturation point and might we finally turn toward a new communalism? Not in the sense that we believe the same things, or that we erase personality, but in the sense of deep and mutual accountability, deep and mutual care. What would it be like to live in a community so embracing that when *you* stumble, *my* knee is skinned? That when you soar, I can see the world as though I were flying? That when you sin, I share in responsibility? That while you are hungry, I can never be satisfied? And that when God’s blessings arrive, they are neither mine nor yours, but always, always ours?

Groundedness. Imagine a new faith that would draw deeply from the earth’s language and its truth. A faith in which water and soil, flora and fauna, air and all the physical universe would help to teach us what is good. A faith in which our poor, wounded, but indomitable earth would sing her song over the din of our rapaciousness and bring us to our senses. Literally “bring us to our senses.” South African cosmologist George F.R. Ellis suggests that ethics are built into the physical structure of the universe. That we do not *decide* what is right and wrong . . . that right and wrong are not human constructs, but part of the very nature of things. Imagine a faith in which Earth-truth and human-truth were the same Truth!

And finally, Justice. Imagine a future in which these truths come clear: Love without justice is not love. Compassion without deeds is not compassion. Faith without action is not faith. And religion without politics is *not* religion. Ah, imagine a future in which the church is no longer the handmaid of the state as it has been for most of our lives, but rather a firebrand of God’s justice bringing what Jesus said it should bring: good news to the poor, release for the captives, recovery

of sight for those who are blind, liberty for those who are oppressed, and the coming of God's good time!

We don't know for sure about any of this, of course. We don't know what is ahead for the life of faith . . . or for life itself, for that matter. I confess that like many of you, I'm disturbed by what I see around me. As Mahler felt about the music that he loved, I look at the church I love, the world that I love, and I know that much of it is passing away. Much of it is in trouble. I cannot deny the sadness of all this. But unless we let go of what has been, how can we ever know what may be? "Unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains alone, but if it dies it bears much fruit." With tears in our eyes, with hope in our hearts, with firmness of step and openness of mind, let us join hands and move toward that promised, sacred harvest. Let the old song, long loved, recede. Let the new song fill the heavens and bless the earth! Amen!

¹A portion of Bernstein's lecture may be viewed at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=U5I7IYN5adU

²See two books by Kearney: Anatheism: Returning to God After God and Reimagining the Sacred: Richard Kearney Debates God with James Wood, Catherine Keller, et. al.