

“Singing”

**A sermon in the Advent/Christmas series
“Christmas (Re)Actions—Responding to God’s Invitation”
by the Rev. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
December 19, 2021—Fourth Sunday of Advent**

A Tony Award®-winning musical called “Something Rotten!” that was all the rage on Broadway a few years ago will be staged by Lakewood’s Beck Center next summer. (I know this because our son Eric has been cast as one of the leads for Beck’s production.) The musical is set in London. The year is 1595. “Something Rotten!” tells the story of two brothers “who struggle to find success in the theatrical world as they compete with the wild popularity of their contemporary William Shakespeare.”¹ They seek guidance and theatrical inspiration from a soothsayer. He tells them that the next big thing in theatre will be... “a musical.”

“What’s a musical?” they ask.

The soothsayer explains, “A play where the dialog stops and the plot is conveyed through song.”

“...Wait, wait. So – an actor is saying his lines, and then out of nowhere, he just starts *singing*?”

“Yes.”²

The brothers then talk about how unbelievable that would be... well, they don’t *talk* about it; they *start singing a song* about it! The show “winks at the audience” while poking fun at the notion of breaking into song in the midst of everyday life.

And yet... that’s not totally unfamiliar to us.

From the gospel of Luke we heard an excerpt from one of the most familiar of all Bible stories. Shepherds were minding their own business, keeping watch over their flocks on the hillsides outside the village of Bethlehem. Out of the blue, they were visited by angels, messengers from heaven.

At first, a single angel announced that ancient prophecy had been fulfilled – a savior was born! Suddenly that angel was joined by an army of messengers, a chorus of angels, a “multitude of the heavenly host.”³ What did they do? They broke into song!

¹ [Something Rotten! - Wikipedia](#) accessed 12/7/2021

² “Something Rotten!” book by John O’Farrell and Karey Kirkpatrick and music and lyrics by Karey and Wayne Kirkpatrick, rights held by Music Theatre International.

³ Luke 2:13 King James Version

“Singing praises to God,”⁴ they joined their voices to sing, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom he is pleased!”⁵

Okay, so in a Broadway musical, people break into song. And in a biblical narrative we hear of an angel being joined by a chorus of back-up singers lifting their voices to praise God.

But regular folks like you and me... we don't break into song in our daily lives. Or do we? Actually, I think it's more common for most of us than we may realize.

True, we may not break into song asking “*Did you pack your lunch?*” or proclaiming “*This soup is so good!*” But in the back of our minds we're constantly playing our own game of “Name That Tune”: when we hear a familiar melody or lyric, we start humming the tune or rattling off the words we learned five, twenty, fifty years ago. Often, we may recall a place or person or situation we associate with that song. We may even feel a twinge of the emotion we felt because of the song's association with that moment or that person.

The power of music to stir memory and emotion is never greater than at Christmastime.

- Maybe you learned popular songs or sacred works singing in school or church or community choirs.
- Maybe you worked retail and heard the same loop of Christmas songs playing in the background of the store for the entire Christmas shopping season.
- Maybe you remember sitting with your grandparents every year in a warm, crowded Christmas Eve service.
- Maybe you recall songs you heard when you shared your first Christmas with your beloved, perhaps while still dating or perhaps newly married.

(At the Cleveland Orchestra Youth Chorus concert at our church two weeks ago, one of the songs they sang was a piece my wife and I remember singing as a duet decades ago at a friend's Christmastime wedding.)

It's one thing to listen to holiday tunes and sacred works and Christmas carols on the radio or in the car or on personal devices. But we want to give voice to hymns and carols we've known and sung since we first learned to carry a tune.

And yet, as we well know, the pandemic caused by this airborne virus has impacted how we breathe the same air in a space. Out of caution for spreading a virus we might not even know we're carrying, we've become familiar with “masking up.” Scientists tell us that the act of shouting or the act of singing has the potential for reaching deep down in our lungs to propel viruses or to inhale them deeply. So we've

⁴ Luke 2:13 Good News Translation

⁵ Luke 2:14 Good News Translation

learned that we have to exercise caution for something as innocent, as familiar, as dear as our singing beloved Christmas carols.

Did you know that there's a biblical precedent for our struggle to be able to sing? We heard it expressed in today's reading from Psalm 137. About 600 years before the birth of Jesus, Israel was overrun by the armies of Babylon, and many of the Israelites were captured and hauled away to live in exile in Babylon for a few generations.

Separated from the comfort and familiarity of their homeland, cut off from their now-destroyed temple, the Israelites' spirits sagged. The psalmist, the songwriter, captured their despair: he wrote, "*Alongside Babylon's streams, there we sat down, crying because we remembered Zion.*"⁶ The Israelites' captors called to be entertained – the psalmist wrote: "...our tormentors requested songs of joy: 'Sing us a song about Zion!' they said. But how could we possibly sing the Lord's song on foreign soil?"⁷ The psalmist wrote that as a sign of their despair, the people took their harps and other instruments and hung them in the trees.

As much as exiled Israelites wanted to sing, as much as their songs about their beloved homeland meant to them, they found it challenging to sing those songs under the difficult conditions they found themselves in.

Perhaps more than ever before, we can relate. Many of us miss singing with exuberance and without restraint. But I think we discover an unexpected benefit from the disappointing but understandable constraints on being able to sing with abandon. We discover just how deeply we appreciate singing God's praise like the angels.

- It doesn't matter what we think of our singing voices.
- It doesn't matter if we've had formal vocal training or we learned to sing as we stood in front of a mirror singing into a hairbrush microphone.
- It doesn't matter if we automatically start singing harmony or if we're lucky just to remember the words to the melody.

We realize as never before that singing is a pleasurable means for expressing our emotions, for recalling dear memories, for declaring good news. It's God's gift to us for expressing what fills our heart.

So on a "silent night" in the days ahead, let us listen. With care, with restraint, with hope for brighter days to come, let us raise our voices: "with the angels let us sing 'Alleluia!' to our King. Christ the Savior is born!"

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⁶ Psalm 137:1 CEB

⁷ Psalm 137:3b-4 CEB