**Old Tune, New Words** Rev. Phillip J. Romine
First Sunday of Christmas The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Psalm 148; Luke 2:22-40 Saint Paul, Minnesota
December 31, 2023

What does it sound like when God is in our midst?

Our most beloved songs—whether hymn tunes, power ballads, pop songs, or obscure one-offs—they anchor something timeless in a specific time and place: because the words speak to our moment, our mood, we see ourselves more clearly in the song; and because the words come to us on the waves of older, primal tunes that resonate with our bodies in ways that ancient and modern music makers understand, the song becomes something new through us.

I grew up singing “Good Christian Men, Rejoice,” which, as someone who was on his way to becoming a man, always struck me as odd. Could Christian kids rejoice? Could any Christian rejoice?? What a relief to learn that our hymnal made the simple yet important change to “Good Christian Friends, Rejoice.” But even before any of the English words came the German and Latin words, “In dulci jubilo, nun singet und seid froh…”, words that don’t even restrict singing and being glad to Christians: the words and tune are for anyone to celebrate and welcome the gift of Jesus. And before those words, the tune was most likely heard in biergartens, with words no doubt more concerned with hoisting steins of lager than proclaiming the wonder of Jesus.

And yet the theme of rejoicing, of making merry, of flinging wide our lives to the gift of the moment has endured.

Our Gospel reading this morning paints a picture of an old tune of divine favor finding its way to Simeon’s lips: the long-awaited Messiah has come, for the glory of Israel and the enlightenment of non-Israelites. While Simeon’s somewhat novel words expand the boundaries of their day, in recognizing the Messiah in the form of a baby—it is actually Anna’s tune, the prophetic tune, that buoys Simeon’s words.[[1]](#footnote-1) Because Anna’s is the abiding tune of the prophets, found most often near the Temple because that should be the place where God’s liberating message of love is regularly broadcast.

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Though silenced by Luke, it also sounds like the faithfulness of Mary. The willingness for a young mother to fulfill her obligations, to make good on walking the journey the angels and others signposted for her, by bringing herself to the place of her people despite the exhaustion of having just given birth. It sounds like Mary offering herself and her new child to the whims, the attitudes, the judgments, the care of whoever has shown up to the Temple that day.

Though silenced by Luke, Joseph’s accompaniment of Mary also resounds to the prophetic tune of the times. His presence testifies to a commitment to the task before his family, whatever their circumstances, and his belief that fulfilling their obligations matters: for himself, for Mary and the child, for his people.

And while we don’t know the content of Anna’s speeches to “those looking for the redemption of Israel,” her prophetic tune was the chant of Israel’s prophets through the centuries: a commitment to the Temple as a place for proclaiming that God would indeed upend the despotic powers of empire. Jesus’ arrival simply confirms the convictions by which she has shaped her life to this point: that redemption is nigh, and that reasons to act are increasing.

As for Simeon, what makes their[[2]](#footnote-2) words matter is the action of cradling and praising Jesus. For Simeon then as it is for us today, it is the vision of the spontaneous joy of someone, full to bursting with enthusiasm, love, and hope, cradling the tiniest infant in their arms and singing a Psalm of liberation, of love, of life abundant.[[3]](#footnote-3)

That’s not what going to the Temple was supposed to be about. We come to our Temples to worship, to be reverent, to attune ourselves with the divine directive by walking through our rituals…and yet what else do we do when confronted with the profound wonder of God’s image enfleshed?

When God shows up in our midst, how do we respond?

What are we doing with the gospel, this good news carried on the ancient tunes of prophecy that casts down the might and lifts up the lowly?[[4]](#footnote-4) Are we simply standing around repeating it? Are we content to keep it to ourselves? Are we most concerned with containing or controlling it?

Or are we moved to behold the holiest possibilities in the earliest, most dependent stages of life? Are we filled with an energy to not just perceive with our own eyes the new reality ushered in by God in Jesus Christ, but to go and do likewise:

* like Simeon, to welcome the divine image imprinted on every single child with singing and dancing and cradling?
* Or like Mary and Joseph, to tiredly, maybe even reluctantly, but still curiously see through on our obligations, in the hopes that they just might be part of the hope for a better world?
* Or like Anna, to continue proclaiming the prophetic tune of liberation, salvation, redemption, justice, but now with an urgency that rings with the overtones of joy?
* Or even like the Christ-child, to be caught up in the warm embrace of family, strangers, and community leaders such that we begin to grow into the person God made us to be?

What might it sound like if we acted as though God is in our midst?

Both the personal act of Simeon cradling and singing to a child not his own, and Anna’s political act of continuing to work toward a social order that cradles and sings and makes space for the flourishing of all children: both require new words for a new reality, and both move to old tunes of a flourishing creation. Both mean the falling and the rising of many; both come with inescapable suffering.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Psychologist Dr. David Walsh notes that “our most powerful recollections [from childhood] tend to be triggered unexpectedly and overwhelmingly by songs, smells, foods, and traditions. The positive feelings of warmth, safety, or happiness are examples of ‘emotional memories.’ Emotional memories are very powerful and important. Just as experiences wire different connections in our brain, experiences also link together emotional connections. Emotions are especially powerful because they focus our attention and are a major determinant of what we remember.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

Do we want a world where children remember being seen but not heard?

Do we want a world where children remember their communities as places of warm embrace, or cold indifference?

Do we want a world where children remember bombs and rubble instead of baths and bubbles?

When the Psalmist commands praise to God, all creation resounds with the tune of glory.[[7]](#footnote-7) How else might the tiniest infants praise God, unless the rest of creation resonates with the divine rhythm? Unless the lion and the lamb and the fatling lie down together?[[8]](#footnote-8) Unless wars and rumors of wars are stilled on the lips of the powerful?[[9]](#footnote-9) Unless the old greet the young with the awe and wonder the young continually try to teach the old?

What does it sound like, what does it look like, what does it feel like when God shows up in our midst?

Back in September, I got an invitation from Elsa, our youth director, to come to the youth retreat. I can do it, I said, as long as Hugo, our 6-year-old, could come with me. Elsa agreed. And she prepared the youth that a non-youth-aged child would be in their midst. Sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth graders met Hugo: their faces didn’t immediately light up like Simeon’s. But by the end of the weekend, they were asking Hugo to join them to go to breakfast, or to play volleyball, or to play basketball, or to sit next to them on the couch. The old tune of Christian hospitality was sung with the words of tween and teens; a tune taught to them by a specific prophet/youth director; a tune nurtured by parents and caregivers and a congregation who are all part of a prophetic tradition: of a faith that proclaims in word and deed the incarnation of the inscrutable God in the form of a child.

For the wisdom to play our part in praising a God who’s continually in our midst, and for God incarnating that wisdom in an infant, I say thanks be to God, Amen.

1. The subordination of Simeon’s words to Anna’s role/work is laid out clearly by Dr. Jimmy Hoke, “Queering the Lectionary: Just Gimme the Gospel!” for 12/31/23, <https://www.patreon.com/posts/just-gimme-31-95194283>, accessed 12/26/31. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Hoke, Queering the Lectionary: “I really like using they/them pronouns for Simeon (as I do in my translation). They are repeatedly described as a “person” (*anthrōpos*), and their description contains few markers of gender outside of their name. It can be a helpful reminder that names do not have to determine gender, and that people in the ancient world could have nonbinary gender experiences.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Hoke, Queering the Lectionary: “speech is not the only form of communication and making oneself and one’s presence known.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Luke 1:52. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Cf. Luke 2:34-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. “What Will Your Children Remember About the Holidays?”, Dr. David Walsh, 12/10/18, <https://sparkandstitchinstitute.com/what-will-your-children-remember-about-the-holidays/>, accessed 12/27/23. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Psalm 148. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Isaiah 11:6. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Matthew 24:6. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)