**Community that Heals** Rev. Phillip J. Romine
Sixth Sunday of Easter The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Psalm 98 Saint Paul, Minnesota
May 5, 2024

I recently experienced a milestone birthday, which I’ve realized has given me license to be old enough to start ignoring new music. Especially these last few years, getting what little time I could to myself to listen to music that calmed and centered me amid the ongoing lockdowns and worries and existential dread—I’ve noticed that I’ve reverted to lots of what I’ll call comfort music: music that was an anchor in my adolescent years. Music that brought me liberation from the confines of a mental and spiritual life that often felt narrow and one-dimensional.

But then in August of last year, Jon Batiste released his album World Music Radio, and I’ve had trouble not listening. And then, six months later, Beyoncé released her album Cowboy Carter. Same problem: really hard not to listen.

Batiste recently noted that he helped write and produce Beyoncé’s opening track, AMERICAN REQUIEM, in a time when he’s been deep in conversation “about the state of music and where we could take it.” Along with others, he writes that “we’ve been having these conversations for years but something about recent times has felt ripe with the power of actualization. When I picked up my guitar and notebook to write this song I put my trust in God to liberate my creative mind, as I always do when channeling inspiration.” He goes on to say that legendary musician and producer Quincy Jones noted in the foreword to Batiste’s last album, WE ARE: “it’s up to you to de-categorize American music”…which, as Batiste writes, is what Duke Ellington told [Quincy Jones].”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Generations of musicians passing along their charge to channel, inspire, deconstruct and reconstruct the possibilities of sonic community together. Artists giving voice to the full breadth of human experience[[2]](#footnote-2) as they bend, play with, and purposely defy convention—not to deride them, but to allow them to grow into greater potential.

If you think this is just the latest iteration of musicians “trying to be edgy,” I encourage you to pick up this month’s Anchor newsletter, in particular our Choir Director Matt Culloton’s notes for the upcoming Pentecost Music Sunday, in which we will worship together around Mozart’s Coronation Mass, K.317. Culloton writes:

Composing Mass settings was an activity based on liturgical norms. In two key instances, Mozart (to the Archbishop’s chagrin) broke away from these standards: first at the conclusion of the Credo movement after the first “Amen,” Mozart has the choir reiterate the opening line of text…and throws in extra Amens to boot. This may have been the first time in history that a composer did that, and Beethoven repeated the choice in his *Missa Solemnis*. The second creative break from norms comes in the middle of the Benedictus (sung by solo quartet), when the choir interjects one of three utterances of the “Hosanna in excelsis” material. One may chuckle when the solo quartet then continues back in their rather pastorale character as if the choir’s outburst never happened.”

“O sing to the Lord a new song…”[[3]](#footnote-3)

This divine enthronement Psalm is one that scholars note belongs to a collection of Psalms celebrating God as the divine king, the truly ultimate Ruler of all that was and is and is to come.[[4]](#footnote-4) Walter Brueggemann and Tod Linafelt write that these psalms “celebrate the new world that is given in [Adonai’s] powerful generosity,” and that this world “is not derived from antecedents but is a fresh miracle of [the Divine].”[[5]](#footnote-5)

For those of us left in the wake of Covid, and coup attempts, and climate instability and persistent poverty, it can be difficult to see these “marvelous things” that God has done. It can be hard to “make a joyful noise to the Lord [and] break forth into joyous song and sing praises,” when not all the earth, when not even the whole of our individual lives, is at peace with itself. Where is God’s judgment of righteousness and equity for those suffering famine in Gaza? For those held hostage by Hamas? For those fleeing conflict and economic collapse in Sudan? For Ukrainians trapped in their towns? For those here in our cities moving from encampment to encampment because we prioritize property values for the few at the expense of dignified living for all?

Even when we are unable to make joyful noises, the Psalmist reminds us that the rest of creation will carry the tune when our breath falters: “Let the sea roar, and all that fills it…let the floods clap their hands; let the hills sing together for joy…”[[6]](#footnote-6) Perhaps when our spirits can’t be stirred to make a new song, to sing our resurrection life as we have in ages past—perhaps we can listen, and learn, and heal as we lean on the natural world.

Yes, that’s the hills and the seas and the Lake Superior shoreline and the new growth in our community garden. And it’s us too: lest we forget that we too are part of God’s natural world. In those lockdown times when we couldn’t come together, staff and members here recorded and distanced and masked and dropped things off, just as the world blossomed and bloomed out our windows. In those times when the veil of history was rent asunder to reveal the depth of depravity about our racialized society and its persistence in our systems—in those times we leaned into our relationships and made choices about our futures, and chose, in many cases, to begin changing what needed to change, and to stop ignoring what could no longer be ignored.

Every child receiving a Bible today, every Confirmand affirming the promises made for them at their baptism, every singing or silent or whispering soul occupying or streaming into this contested and yet still sacred place: not only has God declared us made in the divine image, but in this Eastertide we are reminded of the eternal invitation to inhabit Christ’s body in the world: to plant seeds of righteousness that will grow equity;[[7]](#footnote-7) to make room for and listen to new songs that emerge from surprising places; to establish a haven for strangers in a strange land, a *refugia[[8]](#footnote-8)* for all those marginalized and ostracized by a society that prioritizes production above all else.

If we take the lessons of our faith tradition seriously, if we heed the wisdom of the Psalms, if we accept that God has created us all in the divine image and that we are charged with living into the newness of Christ’s resurrected presence in the world, we can join God’s wider work in the world. We can navigate nature, history, and change not by denying all the death and destruction dealt to us these past few years, but by accepting them in their fullness.

Maybe, as we process all the grief and loss and listlessness of these times, maybe then we can begin to learn to hear old tunes with a new spirit: maybe we can chuckle at Mozart’s contrasts rather than joining the Archbishop in his chagrin. Maybe then we can hear the infinite variety of nature at play as Yo-Yo Ma does when he plays the piece that’s accompanied his entire musical career: Bach’s first cello suite.[[9]](#footnote-9) Maybe we can hear the reclamation of the banjo as the instrument borne from enslavement in the opening bars of Beyoncé’s single, Texas Hold ‘Em.[[10]](#footnote-10) Maybe we can be part of a community—spanning time and cultures and languages and abilities and gifts—a community that heals nothing less than the world, proclaiming even beyond the grave the words Jesus offered at the beginning of his ministry: that God’s kingdom of righteousness and equity is breaking in.

May our noise be joyful, as we join with the sounds of all creation, meeting us in infinite variety as the renewed vision of the Ancient of Days. Amen.

1. @jonbatiste Instagram post, 3/30/24 (accessed 5/3/24). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cf. *Das Lutherwort zum Psalter*, edited by Theodor Brandt (Bad Salzuflen, Germany: MBR Verlag, 1956); *Luthers Vorwort* speaks of the Psalms as that place that give full expression to the human experience of humanity in relation to itself and to God. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Psalm 98:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Cf. *Women’s Bible Commentary*, edited by Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, Jacqueline E. Lapsley (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 222. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Walter Brueggemann and Tod Linafelt, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 323-324. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Psalm 98:7-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Psalm 98:9b [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. <https://worship.calvin.edu/resources/resource-library/becoming-people-of-refugia/>, accessed 5/3/24; with thanks to Elly Verhagen for mentioning this in passing before worship a few weeks ago! [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Yo-Yo Ma, *Nature, Culture, and Healing*, in *Music and Mind: Harnessing the Arts for Health and Wellness*, edited by Renée Fleming (New York: Viking, 2024), 471-472. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2024/04/05/1242304226/beyonce-texas-hold-em-banjo-carter-country>, accessed 5/3/24. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)