

12 December 2021

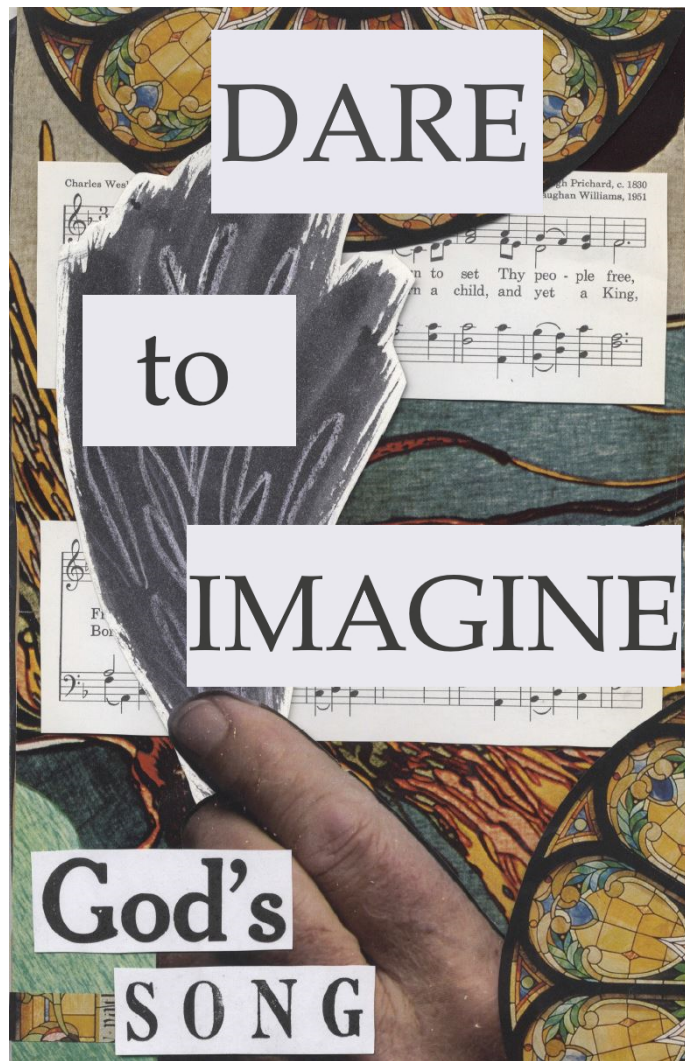
Zephaniah 3:14-20; Philippians 4:4-7

Do we dare to imagine God's song?

First Mennonite Church

Do you sing? I'm not asking if you are good singer, because if I did, then some of you would say, no. You might even say, "if there is congregational singing, I'm the one to bring the bucket to carry a tune." Or, if you're voice is lower, you might even say, "I sing barely-a -tone!"

For this reason, I'm not asking if you sing well, but if you sing. Do you dare sing? We may not want to admit it but all of us have probably sung in the shower. We've sung in our car. We've sung, or at least hummed, under our breath at work. Some of us have sung in the rain. And when



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no one's home, I wonder how many of us have sung in front of the mirror with an imaginary microphone?

Music. It's considered the universal language.

And what a better way of preparing for God's Advent into the world than by singing. Of course, many of us are used to preparing ourselves spiritually through prayer, or by reading your daily devotional booklets and Bibles. Have you ever considered spiritual preparation to include the universal language of music? Have you ever joined a group of carolers? Have you ever attended a Christmas concert and sat in awe as a choir sang Handel's The Messiah and the Hallelujah Chorus? Or, what about when you sit in a congregation on Sunday morning and burst forth as we sing our favourite Advent hymns like, Comfort, Comfort, O My People, Come Thou Long Expected Jesus, and Lo, how a Rose er Blooming?

More than a year ago, I did a sermon series on different metaphors for God. In the Bible, there are many different metaphors for God—metaphors like God as a shepherd, a Judge, a Potter, and even a vulture. Some of you found that one to be not very pleasant. Here in Zephaniah, in these 6 verses, the prophet manages to squeeze not just one metaphor for God, not just two, but three. Zephaniah describes God as a powerful King who stands at Israel’s side, so they no longer have to worry about any more troubles (3:15). The prophet also describes God as a victorious Warrior (3:17a). When I think of a warrior, I think of cold-hearted killing machine whose bravery and steely-eyed courage defeats the enemy. But this warrior does something unusual. This warrior sings. Yes. Sings. Can you imagine God as a singer?

*The Lord, your God, is in your midst,
a warrior who gives victory;
he will rejoice over you with gladness,
he will renew you in his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing. (Zephaniah 3:17)*

In our brown and blue hymnals, I found many royal hymns where God is described as a King—Come, thou almighty king and O worship the king. I found hymns about God as a Shepherd—My Shepherd will supply my need and Gentle Shepherd come and lead us. I also found hymns about God as a father—Children of the heavenly father and Father God you are holy. Lots of songs with metaphors about God as king, shepherd, and father, but I didn’t see one song about God as a singer. If you know of one, let me know after the service.

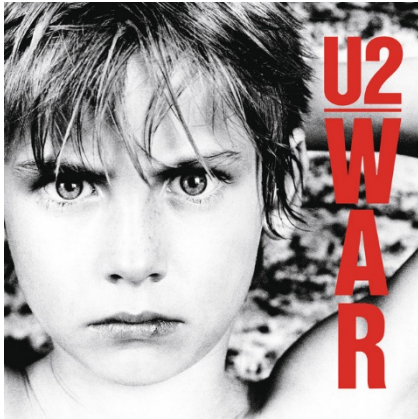
Think about that for a moment. A warrior who sings?! According to Margaret Schaper, a University of Southern California professor of voice, singing “has the power to alter our moods and conjure up memories and feelings. Singing also provides an emotional release, a way to express our thoughts and feelings.”¹



Intimacy? Feelings? Can you imagine the Canadian Armed Forces running an ad campaign that doesn’t include tough women and men holding assault rifles, jumping out of planes, or flying fighter jets, **but singers?**

¹ <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1992-04-02-vw-351-story.html>

All over the world, Christians are celebrating Advent, the season of the preparation for the birth of the Christ child. Many folks are getting ready for the unrestrained joy of angels, eggnog, Christmas cake, lights, carols, and the cheery glow of Christmas, and in comes the sharp-tongued prophet Zephaniah. Read through the book of Zephaniah and you'd be hard-pressed to find anything joyful to sing about. After reading the book of Zephaniah, I'd say he's about as joyful as a broken leg. And what sort of joyful song does Zephaniah sing?



The book has only three chapters, but if it were a song, it might be God's protest song against sin and injustice. Much like the protest song of the Irish Rock group, U2. In the 1980s they wrote a protest song called, Sunday, Bloody Sunday. In the song they described the horror felt by an observer of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. They focused on the 1972 Bloody Sunday incident in Derry where British troops shot and killed unarmed civil rights protesters.

In response to the polarization and deep divisions in Northern Ireland at the time, U2 sang:

The trenches dug within our hearts
And mothers, children, brothers, sisters torn apart

If the book of Zachariah were a song, the title would surely be, **The Day of the Lord**. The day of the Lord says Zechariah will be a day when this utterly holy, just, and righteous God comes among highly imperfect mortals like you and me. When God comes to bring peace to this violent world; when God comes to bring justice to a world filled with injustice, when a HOLY God comes into an unholy world, the prophet can only imagine disturbing language of cosmic destruction.

The Day of the Lord, sings the prophet,

"will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness" (Zephaniah 1:15-16).

What will be the result? We know the result of the Day of the Lord. We read about it in the gospels, in the story of Jesus. God sent Jesus into the world to show us the true character of God, how a holy and just God lived in our broken and sinful world. We are invited to turn, be humble and follow this God. And

the Bible tells us what humans thought—and then did to this God. But that's the season of Lent where we follow Jesus to the cross. We are in Advent. Stay focussed, preacher!

Much of Zephaniah sings the Day of the Lord as being a time of cosmic destruction and doom, and then suddenly, the tone takes a 180-degree turn. The arrival of God's presence brings celebration and cause for joy. It's a grand reversal as the expected doom instead becomes **overwhelming grace and mercy** that leads to new life. We are invited to burst forth with song:

"Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more" (Zephaniah 3:14b-15).

Not only are we invited to sing for joy, but God also sings for joy. It's almost like we are in the middle of a **Mennonite Songfest!**

I don't know about you, but this imagery of God singing over us is **so compelling**. What does God's song sound like, and how do we imagine or encounter it?

These past few days, I've tried to get out the door a little earlier than usual. The reason I went out earlier is to try and catch a glimpse of the latest comet in the night sky, Comet Leonard. Yes, there is a



comet called Leonard. It was named after Greg Leonard, a senior research specialist at the University of Arizona who discovered it back in January 2021. If you want to become famous, at least in the world of astronomy, which is almost as famous as a Hollywood star, then get out there and be the first one to spot a comet.

Astronomers have done orbital calculations on the comet. They say comet Leonard has been on its way to the sun for the last 35,000 years, and once it

passes by, the comet's trajectory will change, and it will leave our solar system never to return.



A century ago, most astronomers believed our galaxy, the Milky Way Galaxy, was the whole universe. And it's not surprising given the fact that our galaxy, stretching more than 100,000 lightyears

across, has billions of stars and even billions more planets orbiting these stars.

Estimates are that the universe contains hundreds of billions of galaxies, maybe trillions, in all shapes and sizes. And it stretches for hundreds of billions of lightyears. Our Milky Way galaxy is like a grain of sand in the Sahara Desert.

As I stood out in the cold dark morning looking upward at all the stars in the sky, I was overwhelmed by the sheer size of the universe. If you never get out of the city away from the light pollution, you never realize how much the city lights obstruct your view. As I gazed upward, I felt I could see forever. I was reminded again how vast the universe is and how small is my place within it. I was humbled—by the absolute splendour of God's creation and by the thought that the God who created the heavens and the earth knows me, is eager for a relationship with me, is a being who sings for me. Go out and look at the night sky. I'm sure you will hear God's song.

You can also hear God's song in the sounds of creation. You can hear God's song in

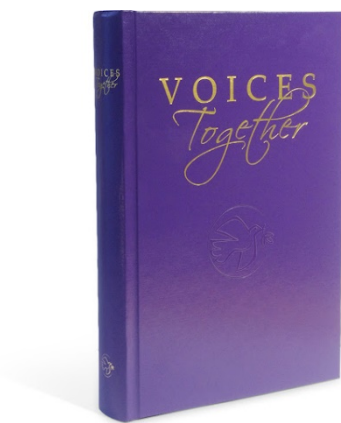


the haunting call of the Loon on a Canadian lake, the creaking and moaning of trees as they wave and bend in the wind, the lilting song of songbirds, the singing of whales and orcas in the ocean, and the gentle purring of a contented cat.

We are more likely to hear God’s song when we quiet ourselves. During the weeks before Christmas, our days are often full of practical preparations—we bake food to share, make or buy presents to give, go to Christmas parties. These preparations are right and good, and I’m not suggesting that we halt them, but they **can be a distraction** from the deeper tasks of this season: to wait, to imagine, to listen, and to inwardly prepare for the coming of the Light of the World. In other words, we must make space for God’s song. As we make that necessary space for God, let’s don’t forget to sing. The ancient Greek philosopher Pythagoras encouraged his students to sing each day to overcome fear and anger, worry and sorrow.

There is something powerful about singing with others. It creates an emotional bond. When we sing together, we create energy and encourage one another as we together raise our voices to God, smile at one another with our eyes because our mouths are covered with a mask, and maybe just maybe, tap your toes, clap your hands, and sway to the rhythm of the music.

We sing. We not only sing old cherished and much-loved songs from when we were children, we must also learn new songs and sing new melodies. Why? New songs about God stretch our understanding of the character and otherness of God, incorporate different metaphors of God beyond king, shepherd, and father.



Take for example the song, **Could it be that God is Singing?**, from the newest Mennonite hymnal, *Voices Together*. The author, Becca Lachman, took Zechariah 3:17 as one of her inspirations when writing this hymn. Here are the words to the song:

1. Could it be that God is singing and these notes are my reply to the God-light warm within me, joining earth and sea and sky? Surely mercy has a cadence—I can feel it in my soul! Surely justice builds a chorus, making all God’s children whole!

2. Have you carried heavy silence, have you let old sorrows win, or proclaimed psalms of forgiveness, but not offered them within? Oh, the Spirit, she was singing, even when we could not hear her abundant streams of living, waiting for us to come near.
3. Hallelujah for my Jesus, for his life's surprising course! May I, too, live bold resistance to injustice, hate, and force. Surely peace, it has a cadence, asking all of what we bring! And if music is God breathing, take a holy breath and sing!

If we only sing familiar songs we know and love, then we become accustomed to singing about God in a certain way and understanding God through very limited and familiar metaphors and rhythm. Take for example, our much beloved Christmas hymn, Silent Night, Holy Night, all is calm, all is bright as an example. It's a wonderful sentimental song that leaves us with that warm feeling that all is bright and well in the world, that there is nothing more idyllic, more perfect, more fitting than giving birth to a baby in a stall. Jesus identified his own mission with what he called the coming "reign of God." We have often settled instead for the sweet coming of a baby who asked little of us in terms of surrender, encounter, mutuality, or any assent to the actual teachings of Jesus.

Don't get me wrong. I like the song. We'll probably sing it Christmas Eve. But my point is, once God becomes sentimental, too familiar, too much like us, then God becomes small—and more manageable. When that happens, then we are tempted to be like God, to manage God, manipulate and control God so that God becomes little more than what I believe to be true.

New songs, however, stretch us, challenge us, invite us to imagine God differently, perhaps more mysteriously and profoundly.

Can you dare imagine a God who sings? Dare to imagine God's song? If you can, then you might well imagine that you can sing too! Singing is part of our DNA. God created us to sing because God sings. Singing gives us hope in times of despair. Joy in times of struggle. It feels good. Lifts our spirits. Empowers us. Shapes us. It's the cheapest form of therapy!

God's song is here —always. It flows gently throughout our earth, perhaps a low humming or near-silent melody that is audible only when we stop and listen deeply. It is written deep into each of our hearts and into the created world. Can you hear it? Sing it? Let's quiet ourselves this season to listen for it. Amen