

# Songs of Arrival

*“ . . . joy and gladness will be found in Zion, thanksgiving and the voice of song.”  
Isaiah 51:3*

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November 15, 2020

The prophet Isaiah urges us in our Old Testament lesson to “look to the rock from which we are hewn, and to the quarry from which we were dug.” Isaiah 51:1. And for these past five weeks of our Stewardship season that is exactly what we have done. We have returned to our foundations, to those things which make us who we are as a church, to our truest identity as God’s people. During our “Quarry Home Companion” series, we have heard testimonials from different members of our community, and we have heard inspiring reports from just some of our wonderful ministries.

And so, it is fitting that today we conclude this exploration of our foundations by hearing these “Songs of Arrival” written by *Aallotar*, music which celebrates this church’s Finnish-American roots and the character of its people. And it is especially appropriate for a Lutheran church to commission a mass that is grounded in folk music, as this was very much a central theme of Luther’s reformation of the church.

In the medieval church, the liturgy was entirely sung or chanted by the priests in Latin, a language not understood by most worshippers. Just as Luther insisted that the Bible be translated into the vernacular language of the people so that they could understand it, he was also adamant that worshippers be given

songs to sing in their own language. And so, he and his fellow Reformers wrote countless mass settings, hymns, and other liturgical pieces using the folk music idioms of their time, adapting the living music of the people for praise and worship in their own language and cadences. Luther wanted *the people* to sing songs of praise just as he sought to give them direct access to God's Word.

Luther, with characteristic eloquence, once wrote this about music's place in worship:

"Music is among God's greatest gifts. How we marvel when we hear music in which one voice sings a simple melody, while three, four, or five other voices play and trip lustily around the voice that sings the melody and adorns it wonderfully with artistic effect, thus reminding us of a heavenly dance where all meet in a spirit of friendliness, caress, and embrace."

And then, with equally characteristic bluntness, Luther adds:

"A person who considers this, and yet does not regard music as a marvelous creation of God, must be a clodhopper indeed and does not deserve to be called a human being; and for his ignorance, he should be required for an eternity to hear nothing but the braying of asses and the grunting of hogs."

You gotta love Martin Luther.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The quotations are from Luther's Forward to Georg Rhau's *Symphoniae*, a collection of chorale motets published in 1538.

Luther's inspiration for his musical reforms to liturgy was, of course, the Bible itself. All told, the Bible contains over four hundred references to singing and fifty direct commands to sing. The longest book of the Bible, the Psalter, is indeed a book of songs, and the Hebrew people routinely sang them during worship as well as on their pilgrimages to Jerusalem for the high holy days.

But more than that, the biblical vision of our future life with God, of our return to Zion, is a reality that is very much grounded in singing. Did you notice the very last verse of our lesson from Isaiah today, where the great prophet describes our future salvation as a return to Eden where there will be "joy," "gladness," "thanksgiving," and "the voice of song." (Isaiah 51:3). Our destiny as a human family is infused with song.

The New Testament makes this musical point even clearer. The Book of Revelation, for example, is in many respects the hymnal of the New Testament, containing in its opening chapters seven great hymns giving witness to the coming Kingdom of Heaven. Indeed, just two weeks ago we heard a lesson from Revelation describing the New Jerusalem as that place where people will gather "from every nation, from all tribes and languages," and together we will stand "before God's throne, palm branches in our hands, singing" with one great, beautiful voice. And with our singing, all human division, prejudice, bias, and conflict will end, all pain and struggle will cease, every tear will be wiped away, and all humanity will be joined together through the majesty and beauty of song.

What music does is to take us places where words cannot go. In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, I was privileged to be

among those who gathered in Washington's National Cathedral for a national day of mourning. And what I remember most about that service was not so much the presence of all the living American Presidents and other dignitaries. Nor was it the eloquent prayers offered by clergy of many different faiths, nor Billy Graham's poignant sermon. Rather what is etched upon my memory is when the little boy and girl choristers of the Cathedral took to the chancel steps and sung in their angelic voices the words of the twenty-third psalm in Isaac Watt's beautiful musical paraphrase, "My shepherd will supply my need." This exquisitely tender moment of song, offered at a time of unspeakable tragedy, proved yet again what every experienced preacher knows: When words fail, sing a hymn.

Yet, the power of song extends far beyond lament. We sing to celebrate, to give thanks, to praise, to express wonder, to question, to protest, to encourage. At the beginning of our lives, our mothers sing us to sleep; and at the end of our days, our families gather round us as we die to sing us into the next life. Songs shape us at a deep emotional level. Singing connects us one to another, and to the divine in mysterious ways. As St. Augustine put it, when we sing, we pray twice; once with our words, and then again with the melody of our hearts.

We sing not only because God wants us to, but also, it turns out, because it is good for us. Modern science confirms what the Bible teaches. Recent studies demonstrate that regular singing helps to regularize heart rhythms, lower blood pressure, improve the respiratory and immune systems, combat the psychological effects of loneliness, and enhance mood. Indeed, a 2008 joint Harvard-Yale study found that choral singing may even enhance longevity. Faith and science are compatible after all!

Now I realize, of course, that these words of mine are hard to hear just now, as we together lament the harsh reality that, because of COVID, we cannot gather together in church to sing, and we haven't done so for months. This sacrifice leaves us all with a big whole in our hearts during this extended period of pandemic exile. We yearn to stand shoulder to shoulder in the pews, singing our hearts out, feeling in our souls a deep lyrical connection to each other and to God.

But instead, we are left with a desire that cannot be met, at least for now. An absence that cannot be filled.

But what if this period of forced exile is its own instructive place to dwell? In an age of immediate gratification, we are used to getting what we need quickly; but yet, we would do well to remember that in our spiritual tradition, the concept of holy longing runs deep. We long for heaven while we are on earth. We long for peace in a world of war. We long for justice in a world that continually frustrates those aims. We long for God yet meet him only sparingly. As Saint Augustine once wrote, the whole life of a Christian can be described as a holy desire for God: "our hearts are restless," Augustine prays in the *Confessions*, "until they find rest in Thee."

As a former Harvard student of mine, now priest, recently wrote about the pandemic: "Perhaps the current prolonged period of unfulfilled desire for the full experience of church is preparing us for something even greater. Perhaps our unmet longing will widen our hearts, increasing our empathy for all those people around the world who live in a perpetual state of yearning for what is

consistently denied them – peace, justice, equality, food, safety. And perhaps now, having been deprived of people and connection and community for so long, we will appreciate anew how much we depend upon one another for our own flourishing. Maybe not getting to be the church is exactly what the church needs to awaken the sense of longing and desire that will propel us back into communities of faith that feed us in ways we didn't even know we needed, communities that possess a more capacious spirit and a more generous sense of mission."<sup>2</sup>

So, with that thought in mind, let me close this morning with a prayer I have paraphrased from the Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggeman. I offer it as a prayer of thanksgiving for the gift of song given to us today by *Aallotar*, a prayer to sustain us until that time when all of us can once again be together, packed into this church, singing songs of praise:

*God of all harmony,  
We are people who must sing to you,  
for the sake of our very lives.  
You are a God who must be sung by us,  
for the sake of your majesty and honor.  
And so we thank you,  
for lyrics that push us past our reasons,  
for melodies that break open our givens,  
for cadences that call us home,  
for tones and tunes that open our lives beyond control*

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<sup>2</sup> Noah van Niel, "The Church is Other People: Why We Need to Gather in Person," [www.plough.com](http://www.plough.com) (Oct. 9, 2020).

*and our futures beyond despair.*

*We thank you for mothers whose lullabies*

*sing us to sleep in peace and safety;*

*We thank you for the good company*

*of artists, poets, musicians, cantors, and instruments*

*that sing for us and with us, toward you.*

*We are witnesses to your mercy and splendor;*

*And we will not keep silent, but will forever and always*

*raise our voices to you and for you*

*in the stunning splendor of song. Amen.*