

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

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Sing Songs of Hope

Dr. Jo Forrest

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When the ancient Israelites would journey to Jerusalem for the festivals or set out on a pilgrimage, they sang. As they walked along to roads to Jerusalem, looking up, they wondered if the surrounding hills sheltered robbers or hosted some hostile deity. Singing unifies, helps pass the time, and brings comfort.

Psalm 121 begins with one voice or voices singing “I lift up my eyes to the hills/ where will my help come?” To this anxious question, another voice or chorus responds, “My help comes from the Lord/ the maker of heaven and earth.”

One side calls with fear and the other side responds with assurances that God will provide shade from the harsh desert sun and fragile light from the moon.

Through this call and response form of singing, this psalm grounded the pilgrims to trust that God will watch over their “coming and going from now and forever more.”

The Book of Psalms is the equivalent of the Hebrew Hymnal with evidence of successive generations of prophets and

people singing from it. Even Jesus spoke or sang snippets of verses in times of trial or to comfort others.

Music encompasses the mystery of what rises between notes and lyrics. Minor chords convey foreboding. Harmonies unite. We are a people who sing our faith.

The Israelites told their stories with melodic cadence in the Hebrew, unfortunately lost in our English translations. As the elders spoke, they moved their body in synch with the rhythms and rhymes as younger listeners heard and learned to feel the story. They stitched their faith into their being as readily as we know *Jesus Loves Me* and could sing it right now without music or lyrics.

Hebrew scripture also preserves complete songs. When you stumble across a new song, pay attention, God is about to change the world, again.

The Book of Exodus records Moses' sister, Miriam, who sang of liberation and banged her tambourine when the Israelites pass through the Red Sea.

Hebrew scripture tells in 1 Samuel of the rise of the nation of Israel from dispersed and oppressed tribes through an allegory of a childless woman, Hannah, who bears a son. When she dedicates her son Samuel to God in the temple, she lifts her voice to God in praise. Another song of triumph. It is her son who anoints David to rule, reunites the tribes of Israel, and quashes the enemies to become the greatest of all kings.

In the New Testament, the writer of Gospel of Luke records three new songs sung within the fledgling Christian community. In the late first century, the early followers risked their lives to profess faith in the risen Christ echoing the old songs of liberation.

Jesus' mother is called Mary in the Greek language, which comes from the Hebrew name, Miriam. Miriam inspired the young Miriam or Mary's *Magnificat*, in which you hear echoes of the original score rousing a defiant desire to be free. Mary's *Magnificat* is perhaps the best known of the Lukan hymns. The next is Zechariah's *Benedictus*.

When the angel Gabriel told Zechariah his wife would finally bear a son, he doubted, and Gabriel silenced him. After nine months and eight days of muteness, his son is born. Zechariah finally regains his voice. He tells us what his son, John the Baptist, will become.

Before I read, please pray with me.

*Loving God,
the grass withers and the flowers fade,
but your Word stands forever.*

*So today we pray—
help us to truly hear it.*

Allow your words to sink deep into the marrow of our bones.

*Allow your words to lift our hearts in hope,
that we might feel one day closer to your promised day.*

*With hopeful and grateful hearts, we pray,
amen.*

Luke 1:67-80

⁶⁷Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied:

⁶⁸“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,

for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.

⁶⁹ He has raised up a mighty savior for us

in the house of his child David,

⁷⁰ as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,

⁷¹ that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.

⁷² Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors and has remembered his holy covenant,

⁷³ the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,

to grant us ⁷⁴ that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,

might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness in his presence all our days.

⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,

⁷⁷ to give his people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins.

⁷⁸ Because of the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us,

⁷⁹to shine upon those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

⁸⁰The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

Advent might have begun three Sundays ago, but Spotify’s data shows the holiday season kicked off on November 11.

That day 2% of all music requested fell in the genre of Christmas music and steadily rose each successive day.

Today will be the peak time for playlists of *Jingle Bells* and that dreaded, *Alvin and the Chipmunks*. ¹

While researching this sermon and typing that title, I wondered if I’d make it through this season without hearing “Alvin” shouted. It reminds me of calling for my equally thickheaded dog and how irritating I must sound.

Christmas playlists barely change from year to year. If you request “new” Christmas music, you might hear something

¹ Jadrian Wooten, The Economics of Christmas Music,” *Monday Morning Economist* on Substack, December 4, 2023, <https://www.mondayeconomist.com/p/christmas-music>

from Cher or the Lumineers, but it will be their version of an old favorite.

Why would Alanis Morissette take her turn at a new arrangement of *What Child is This* rather than keep with her post-grunge hard rock?

If you want to make money with Christmas music, go to the familiar.

Silent Night, composed in 1818 remains the most popular of all time with over 28,000 track counts on Spotify offered by choirs and crooners. *White Christmas* appears next at 20,000 tracks, first performed in 1940. Mariah Carey's *All I want for Christmas is You* lumbered along for twenty-five years before making it in the top ten of holiday classics.

Why?

We don't listen to Christmas music year-round, usually, and therefore do not become tired of hearing it.

We tend to look forward to our old favorites putting us into the holiday spirit. A sense of nostalgia drives us. We wistfully desire to reclaim a childhood joy. Unlike other forms of music, we tend to inherit the tunes our parents loved in their childhood. Our most popular holiday tunes even sing of nostalgia.

*I'm dreaming of a white Christmas
Just like the ones I used to know.*

It arouses the sentiment of comfort and an elusive sense of “home” that has nothing to do with place but feeling as though we belong. As I say that, can you just hear “I’ll be home for Christmas...if only in my dreams”?

If a recording artist wants to hold your loyalty during the holidays, the last thing they should do is risk new music – just create a new version of beloved song.

Even this method to etching a song into your heart is not new strategy. Our songs of faith, sung by generation after generation lifts what came before.

When Zechariah sings, is it a new song? No, and yes.

His gratitude for a son prompts his praise that begins with thanking God; “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel.”

Almost a copy from what Miriam sang during the exodus and Hannah of her son’s birth, Zechariah begins with the nostalgic and soothing praise to God. Just when you think all is lost, God delivers.

In just a few breaths, his song reminds everyone that ancient prophets, centuries before Zechariah, promise God’s mercy. Zechariah sings of God who remembers the covenant sworn to Abraham.

From the House of David, God will raise a savior for those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death.

It feels good to retell these stories. The nostalgia does more than feel good, it emboldens the community. The phrases “ancestor Abraham” and the iconic “House of David” recall the days when God rescued the faithful from no-way out situations to bring them home.

After a lifetime of disappointment, longing for a child ... After a lifetime of living with a foreign power terrorizing his community, Zechariah's song resounds with hope. An old man singing of the future possesses the power to transform our weariness into joy links generation to generation. Just like Tony Bennet singing with Lady Gaga.

When you linger in weariness or feel pushed to despair, remember your faith. Sing the songs that endure. Sing praises to God and let God stir a divine joy within you.



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2040 Washington Road
Pittsburgh, PA 15241
412-835-6630
www.westminster-church.org