

“Zack’s Song”

Luke 1: 67-79 NRSVue

Zechariah’s Song

Zechariah had plenty he could have griped about. Being struck dumb precisely when he had something significant and world-changing to say. When was the last time anyone had seen and spoken to an angel of God? And that, right in the Holy of Holies.

He has something to say, but his lips are zipped shut.

Can you imagine the waiting? Israel had been waiting 400 years for a sign of God’s promises being fulfilled, and here he was—top high priest of the year with all the goods—and he had to sit on it and wait until John was born and named John.

We can assume that Gabriel’s curse also kept him from writing the truth down for everyone to know. I’m sure everyone had asked. But no, he went on his way with his eyes bulging out like he was dying to say something, but couldn’t. What a lesson in patience!

When his moment comes—when he has to name his son—he is handed a pad and is able to write, “His name is John.”

With the prophecy fulfilled, his tongue is loosened and he can speak. He could have griped. He could have turned to his wife and clarified all he had been trying to say for the past several months. He could have finally

gotten out his story of meeting Gabriel—and explained himself to clear his good name, because I’m sure a lot of people in the community would have assumed God was punishing him for some old sin.

But no. Rather, with the promises fulfilled, Zechariah is content. And not only content, but joyous. The text says he was filled with the Holy Spirit—like his son in womb, like Mary—the music cue swells and Zechariah sings this marvelous song of God’s fulfillment of all the Old Testament’s prophecies—the promises of God’s redemption through the Messiah—the new Moses, the new David, the Son of God who is the tender mercy of God blessing all humanity.

In Zack’s song, there is perfect continuity between the Old Testament and the New—a perfect continuation of the faith.

How to Worship

That year, as the high priest selected by lot to enter the Holy of Holies, Zechariah was Israel’s A-number-one worship leader. His duties in the Temple would have been highly prescribed. Wear *this*, step *here*, use *this* hand and not *that* hand, do *this* and whatever you do, don’t do *that*, and so on. No liberty or freedom—just run the script and don’t ask questions.

Some people prefer worship that way.

If God had told us to worship Him by standing on our heads, that is what we all would have always been doing, which would have made for some very interesting church buildings. And pews.

If God had told us to bow down facing Jerusalem four times a day, we would be doing that. But that's not what God has said. How are Christians to worship? Paul told us—as we read a few weeks ago—in Ephesians 5:

Be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to one another, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ (Ephesians 5: 18b-20a)

Sing, make melody, give thanks—it all sounds so lovely, pleasant, and wonderful, doesn't it? Yeah, and it should be. So why has the Church endured so many years of what we call “The Worship Wars”?

The Worship Wars

No other factor divides American church-going like music. What an irony! Music—the divine language intended to bring people together in joy—has instead divided people as worshipers.

I want to think we define ourselves by our theology, but it's not really the case. We have in our congregation former Catholics, former Methodists, Lutherans, Baptists, Nazarenes, and *Nones-of-the-aboves*. Those theological differences don't matter so much, which is excellent.

But “if I ever see a big drum kit, I'm *outa* here!” or “We're leaving First Pres because we like more *contemporary* music.”

When I started here 15 years ago, I had several people inform me, “We're here for the choral music. If you change the music, we're not going to stay.” I could barely believe my ears.

Oddly enough, we've had *more* people depart for not being contemporary *enough*.

Strictly speaking, we don't have *worship wars*; we have *music wars*. And this goes on across the country in all the mainline denominations. Where do we set the slider to keep people together?

As the saying goes, you can please some of the people all of the time or all of the people some of the time, but you can't please all the people all the time.

This was not a problem until the mid-20th century. People had no expectations of church music *pleasing* them. They sang hymns because that's what you do in church. On your own time, you can listen to whatever you like. You sang hymns in church and rocked out to Elvis on your car radio—no problem.

Somehow, music aesthetics came into the church and parked its fat rear in the first pew, and has been passing judgment on worship ever since, turning worshipers into Simon Cowells, who not so much participate and perform as *pass judgment* on the service. And on Monday mornings, we pastors eagerly read the reviews online:

“Music was good, sermon okay—I give it three and a half stars.”

“I would have given it four stars, but I didn't like the way they updated ‘How Great Thou Art’—and that guitar has got to go!”

You get the idea. We American Christians have turned worship into a spectator event rather than a group-participation happening. Congregants fancy themselves audience members, there to be pleased.

So what do pastors do? One of four things:

1. Imitate more successful churches.

I worked with one Sr. Pastor who was clear on this. I suggested that we shouldn't just try to imitate what bigger churches do. He said the opposite. "No, that's *exactly* what we need to do. If we're going to grow, we have to do whatever other growing churches are doing." I held my tongue enough *not* to say, "If all your admired churches jumped off a cliff, would you?"

2. Please the Congregation.

Give the people what they want, the way they want it. While this tends to be *very* popular in each particular congregation, it pretty much abandons anything like *growth* and, therefore, *leadership*. Plus, since when does *any* group of 20 or more Presbyterians agree on *anything*?

3. Please the Outsider.

This is outreachy, at least. You all here are already Christians; we have to shape worship for the strangers, the man on the street, and those who have never been to church. We need to *use* music to *draw* people in so they can hear the gospel.

This isn't without value, but it is chasing relevance. And consider how chasing relevance through musical style misses the church's central purpose. It takes a toll on our integrity.

Theologian Marva Dawn asks a great question:

"Why let those who know least about worship make most of its decisions?"

The Gospel IS relevant—it is the only relevance that matters. The church should never become a culture-chaser. When it does, it looks like a 75-year-old man with saggy baggy blue jeans and a backwards baseball cap. Embarrassing.

4. Blend it.

By having some of the old and some of the new, we guarantee to disappoint everyone—at least a little—every week. This, I think, is the best route. Remember, we have five generations worshipping together. That's five competing sets of music preferences and sentiments in the same room. We should celebrate that, because that is what the music is supposed to do—bring opposites together.

What's more, it provides an arena for Christian growth and maturity.

Musical Maturity

By maturity, I mean *musical* maturity, which is always in high demand. Musical maturity is not what you might guess—it doesn't mean we only seek the most high-brow styles. It means we put the musical style in its proper place, somewhere lower on the scale of what matters in worship.

When I served as an Interim Pastor in Cambria, I introduced guitar-led music. They were late to the party, but hadn't had any guitar-playing pastors or music directors. We did what we could in addition to the organ-led church choir.

The moment came after about a year, when the long-time clerk of Session, who always kindly let me know how much he disliked seeing guitars in worship, finally conceded. He said: “You know, I *still* don’t like these praise songs, but I’m glad that we do it because the younger people seem to like it.” That’s maturity. It’s not about me and what I want; it’s what advances our outreach. God bless him—that’s what it’s all about.

He went from grumbling (in a kind way) and wrinkling his nose with every strum, to celebrating the positive experience others were having. That matters.

Sing it Out!

Zechariah is our model for how to worship, *not* as the high priest of Jerusalem, but as the humbled, Holy Spirit-filled singer.

There are people who don’t like this or that kind of music. They dislike rock or repetitiveness, while others dislike old-fashioned music forms. Some people don’t want to sing. Others don’t like the way others sing—either too loudly or too warbly or whatever.

There was an old New Yorker cartoon with a couple in church (that oughta indicate just how old it was!). They’re standing with hymnbooks and the man seems perfectly happy and content with his mouth moderately open. His wife is leaning into him saying:

“Easy on the Hallelujahs, Harry.”

My favorite church singer—I think I’ve told you—was the other Associate Pastor in Edmond, Oklahoma. Tom loved to sing but

seriously, clinically, pathologically tone deaf. No kidding. He wasn’t a half-note off pitch; he could be 4 steps off. Yet he loved to sing. I had to be careful in worship because we sat side by side up front in our little pastor chairs. If I looked at him, I would have to start laughing, because his face was so full of joy and contentment, and there was no connection between his heart and his tone-deafness. People would see me smiling as I sang and more than once remarked to me:

“Pastor Noel—I can tell you love the music because you sing with such joy!” I couldn’t tell them how hard it was for me not to burst into tears of laughter. I loved my friend Tom, and I know his singing was a delight to the Lord, even as it was to me. If you can’t sing, that’s no reason not to sing!

I know a pastor who was singing at a funeral. He was up front in the pastor’s chair, and when he sang, his eyes watered, and he repeatedly had to wipe his nose even as he sang. Following the service, a congregant beamed up at him, saying, I could tell that the hymn really moved you. The truth is, that pastor had a nose hair that either curled in on itself or grew across to the other side of his nostril, and when he sang, it vibrated and itched so badly it made his eyes water. He wiped his nose and sniffed hard to clear it to no avail. That pastor is ME!

Bottom line: it doesn’t matter if you don’t like singing because it is what we are instructed to do as worship!

Singing changes us. When we sing, we are the show, not the audience. God hears us, and we perform for His ears alone.

Whatever is wrong with us or going wrong in life, we *sing!*

Like the early martyrs awaiting death in the Roman Coliseum, who sang in gratitude for being considered worthy enough to suffer for Jesus' name—we sing through pain, affliction, oppression, depression, attacks, betrayals, wins, losses, successes, failures—everything.

This is our witness—the Holy Spirit working in us. It is what draws us together in spiritual unity, healing wounds and redeeming all sin.

You may have heard the redemptive phrase “Hug it out” as a means of reconciliation? Well, not all are huggers. Christian worship includes singing. We, like Zechariah, filled with the Spirit, are to *Sing it out!*

Music charms the savage beast and it softens the hardened human heart. We have disagreements, but gather and sing side by side. We sing it out.

Whatever baggage you bring with you today, sing it out.

But Pastor, I'm *hurting!* *Sing it out!*

“I'm terribly depressed!” *Sing it out!*

“I have financial trouble!” *Sing it out!*

“My children have changed!” *Sing it out!*

“My grandmother died.” *Sing it out!*

“I'm ugly, and no one likes me.” *Sing it out!*

Like Zechariah,

Be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to one another, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. †