

A New Song

Please pray with me:

May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

As we will hear in today's scripture reading of Psalm 96, God wants us to sing a new song. That this is a divine command and not merely a human option can be gleaned from the fact that the words *Sing a new song* are explicitly stated in Psalm 33:3 – *Sing to him a new song*; Psalm 40:3 – *He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God*; Psalm 98:1 – *Sing to the Lord a new song*; Psalm 144:9 – *I will sing a new song to you, my God*; and Psalm 149:1 – *Praise the Lord. Sing to the Lord a new song*. Why such an emphasis on singing a new song? John Bell, in his book *The Singing Thing*, offers some reasons why we need to sing new songs. He says, and I quote, "Today is not the same as yesterday, and what was good reason for praise or complaint in the past may not hold true in the future . . . The church has always encouraged, resisted, evoked, revoked, argued about, and eventually accepted new songs . . . Sometimes it may be the inadequacy of the existing repertoire but sometimes it is concrete social and political realities which inspire or require new songs . . . It is not a matter of aesthetic or liturgical taste. It is a matter of obedience to a divine command and of admitting that old skins cannot hold new wine . . . God is deserving of words and music which celebrate God's magnificence, generosity, and imagination. Therefore, not for a moment disregarding that which has proven its value in worship, we must yet sing God new songs as a sign that our love of God is lively and not tired, expectant and not presumptuous."

I grew up in First Mennonite Church here in Saskatoon, and we used the blue Mennonite Hymnary, published in 1940. I loved the hymnary – it was important to me. In 1969 General Conference Mennonites and the "Old Mennonites" jointly published the Mennonite Hymnal. Even as a 14-year-old, I had misgivings about what we had lost. Ah, but what did we gain? An inspired and inspiring version of *Praise God from whom all blessings flow*, the beautiful Irish *Be thou my vision*, the stirring hymn by a Mennonite writer *I owe the Lord a morning song*, and many others. Hymnal: A Worship Book was published in 1992 and introduced churches to music from the Taizé community, and to world music from the global church. Two supplements were published – *Sing the Journey* in 2005 and *Sing the Story* in 2007 – featuring more contemporary hymns and songs. And now in 2020 we have *Voices Together*. Yes, it is a new hymnal, and yes, there are many new hymns, but 419 of the hymns in *Voices Together* are from Hymnal: A Worship Book, *Sing the Journey*, or *Sing the Story*. That is 54%! Only 356 songs, or 46%, are new to *Voices Together*. This morning, we will sing many familiar melodies – Scottish, Irish, Jewish, American traditional, Pentatonic, African American spiritual, classical – but they will all be new to *Voices Together*. Many will be new texts to those familiar melodies. Some will be completely new. *Musica Tribus* will help us!

The melody of the first hymn that we sang this morning, *Summoned by the God who made us*, is based on a pentatonic, or five note, scale. If you play the black keys on a piano, you will play a pentatonic scale. If you want to sing a new song, try singing a pentatonic melody as a round song. The harmonies are delightfully different from what our western ears are used to. Other examples of hymn tunes based on pentatonic scales include *Were you there*, *Amazing grace*, and *Holy manna* (#25 in VT).

Sometimes a beloved hymn skips a hymnal. Such is the case with *How great thou art*. It was included in Mennonite Hymnal (1969), omitted in Hymnal: A Worship Book, and is back in *Voices Together* - #436.

I have always loved Dvorak's Symphony #9 – his "New World" symphony. We will sing a hymn written by Lori True in 2007 using the melody that Dvorak used in the second movement of his New World symphony – VT #533. That will be followed by a hymn introduced to me by Barb Nickel at Lorene Nickel's funeral. *Still my soul* was written and composed by Katie Graber and Charlene Nafziger – VT #603.

Sing, praise and bless the Lord (VT #77) is a song from the Taizé community. Taizé is a prayerful form of music known for its simple, yet rich and meditative character.

Ruth Duck, a prolific and renowned hymn writer, wrote the next hymn which uses the Irish traditional tune *Wild mountain thyme*. VT # 636.

Hymnal: A Worship Book included the hymn *The God of Abraham praise* (HWB #162). The text was the Yigdal prayer, or Jewish doxology. That hymn, with altered text, is also in VT #204. However, the same tune is used for a new hymn in VT which we will sing – VT #190 – The God of Sarah praise.

John Bell of the Iona Community wrote the hymn *There is a line of women* and paired it with the English carol melody *The seven joys of Mary*. In VT # 546, Bell's text is paired with a melody by Charlene Nafziger.

VT #681 *Ev'ry time I feel the spirit* is often sung by choirs. Congregations can sing it too! Lets!

Lora Braun wrote *There's a wild hope in the wind* (VT #828) for Mennonite Church Canada's Assembly 2014. And Bryan Moyer Suderman has written many songs suitable for young and old (small & tall – Bryan founded SmallTall Music). Once again, the accompaniment is by Charlene Nafziger.