

**“New Songs for Our Hearts:
Joining Humbly in Another’s Song”**

Psalm 46; 2 Corinthians 4:1-10 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – May 26, 2024

*Holy God, bless the speaking, the singing, and the hearing of these words, that we might be
blessed by sharing in history that we cannot write ourselves. Amen.*

This is the last Sunday of our worship series “New Songs for Our Hearts.” Our hymn today is #631, “Lift Every Voice and Sing.” Let’s begin by having Deborah play it for us. ... I’m curious how many of you are familiar with this song? Some of you likely know that it is often referred to as the “Black National Anthem,” though others take issue with what that phrase can imply. “Lift Every Voice and Sing” was written as a poem by noted civil rights leader James Weldon Johnson in 1900. He wrote it for a grade school assembly celebrating the birthday of Abraham Lincoln. His brother, John Rosamond Johnson, set it to music. They actually collaborated on numerous hymns over the years. The story goes that the children from that school, where James Weldon Johnson was the principal, kept the song alive at various events for the next couple of decades, which is good because it didn’t appear as sheet music until 1921. It was eventually adopted by the NAACP and was used prominently through the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s.

For me, this song, and especially this song this weekend, provides us with an opportunity for reflection. This series started off with the less flowery name “Hymns We Should Know More About.” And this is one of them. I believe we should all know

this song and its important history. But I have never been convinced that it's a song that can be appropriately sung by a predominantly White congregation like our own. There are legitimate differences of opinion about that question, and honestly, many of them reside within my own heart. How can we know a song if we don't sing the song? What do we miss out on if we never sing the song? What is missing from our experience and understanding of our history and our faith if we don't familiarize ourselves with the many different perspectives that are part of both?

As I said, this is an occasion for reflection. I have more questions than answers. There is a very fuzzy line here, one that we must approach with deep humility. Because singing this song isn't just about learning new music. It's about learning to embrace stories that aren't ours with respect and gratitude for what they can teach us. We're marking Memorial Day today. Do you know about the African American history of Memorial Day? The first commemoration that is recognizable as a precursor to Memorial Day was held by a largely African American crowd in Charleston, South Carolina, where they were decorating the graves of Union soldiers, Black and White, before the Civil War was even quite finished. There were many Union soldiers who ended up in graves across the South, and it was the area's Black residents who were interested in honoring their memories. Eventually, as you know, Decoration Day became Memorial Day, and it came to honor all those who were lost in war. But as Frederick Douglas said in a Decoration Day speech in 1878, "There was a right side and a wrong side in the late war which no sentiment ought to cause us to forget, and while

today we should have malice toward none and charity toward all, it is no part of our duty to confound right with wrong, or loyalty with treason.”

All of this is part of our history, and we have a duty to learn it and know it and learn from it. When we read the words “bitter the chastening rod, felt in the days when hope unborn had died,” from the second verse of “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” we may flinch. But those of us whose ancestors were not enslaved need to understand that our flinching is of a different sort. We need to bravely confront the demons in our past, rather than appropriating the pain of others. Only through such honest assessment can we truly pursue unity.

This is not important simply for reasons of being better citizens. We may have the same flinching reaction when we read the words in Second Corinthians, “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed.” Because most of us, unlike first century Christians, are rarely afflicted or persecuted. Indeed, when White Christians who obviously remain the dominant culture in our country try to take on a pseudo-biblical identity of oppressed victimhood, that is when we start causing trouble. If we were to approach these verses with listening hearts instead, with an active awareness of our African American siblings’ history of faithfulness in the face of repression, we will come much closer to learning the lesson the Spirit is offering us.

We, too, have struggles, though they may pale in the face of enslavement and Jim Crow. We can learn how to be faithful in the face of difficulty, without pretending that

our troubles are the same. And perhaps even more importantly, we can learn how to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past, by confronting the ugly chapters of our history and seeing them as opportunities for repentance and transformation, rather than shameful things we must strive to cover up. Listening to and learning from the experiences of others – people whose histories are different than ours – can help us understand our faith more deeply and practice it more faithfully. It is not surprising that there is something of chasm between us and first century Christians living under Roman occupation. The danger is when we forget that such a chasm exists. And yet, as the fragilities and fault lines of our own modern democracies become more apparent, we need these lessons from our forebears to help us navigate faithfulness in the face of difficulty. “The nations are in an uproar.” We desperately need to remember that “God is our refuge and strength.” We do need to admit how easy it is for “our feet [to] stray from the places, our God, where we met thee.”

And so today we will sing this song. I pray we will sing it with humility, recognizing that we can only share in the lessons of this history if we own up to the sins of the past. I pray we will sing it with openness, so that our hearts might be transformed by the witness of those who have faced unimaginable suffering. I pray we will sing it with gratitude, for the grace of God that has brought us together in unity with those whose experiences are different than ours. I pray we will sing it with hope, that the future might be guided by the wisdom gained from the past. At the very least, let us sing it with gusto, in praise of the God who carries us through. Hallelujah and Amen!