

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
February 13, 2022

Sing

They left in a hurry. With their enslavers close behind. Hurrying through the hot desert dunes, with the sun beating down upon the backs. Pharaoh and his armies pursued, chased God's people to the edge of the land, to the water's edge, to a road block.

Then with minutes to spare, a strong east wind blew, and by some miracle the sea parted. On the other side was safety, on the other side was hope, on the other side was freedom. And so they walked through the parted waters.

And when they reached the dry land, when the waters came crashing down upon their oppressors, the people of God sang.

Moses led the people in a song of praise: *Sing to God of victory! God is our strength and song, God is our salvation!*

Miriam the prophet, took her tambourine, and all the women followed, singing and dancing, call and response: *Sing to God! Victory is mine!*

Once on the other side, once free, with the danger behind them, the people sang.

That's how the story is recorded; written down and published. But the ancient rabbis and sages offer a different order of events.

They surmised the peoples' song started **before** the dry land, the security, the freedom. They argued that Moses joined the chorus, that Miraim rattled her tambourine, not once they reached the other side, **but as they crossed.**¹

The Rabbis claimed that with their enslavers still on their heels, with the hope of freedom in sight, but not yet in reach, with the waters of the sea trembling around them, the people sang. *Sing to God who is our strength and song. Sing to God!*

¹ *The Singing of the Oppressed* Rabbi Steven Nathan.
www.reconstructingjudaism.org/dvar-torah/singing-oppressed

Victory is ours. They sang of freedom before they had it.

The ancient wisdom suggest that the people sang because it gave them strength and courage in the face of such terror. They did not know if the walls of water would collapse over them or if their oppressors would overtake them or if another band of enemies awaited them on the other side. So as they marched, they sang—they sang of freedom and victory, strength and hope.

Protest songs or, as they were commonly known as, *Freedom Songs* were a vital part of the community organizing tradition of the Civil Rights movement. When folks gathered for voter registration drives or non-violent resistance training, one of the first things organizers did was teach local people freedom songs. They thought songs that were borrowed from church hymns, helping thaw some of the fear newcomers had toward the movement. And like church, these songs were congregational; people clapped and sang along with songs that expressed freedom in the face of oppression and courage in the face of

fear. Participation was far more important than the quality. Everyone was a participant, everyone was expected to sing. If you felt you couldn't sing, you were told to sing louder.

Freedom music, protest music, was understood as a tool for liberation. It was an instrument that was powerful enough to take people away from mortal dangers and fears; filling them with the strength and determination to fight, to march, to keep going. Singing was the foundation of the resistance.

People would sing while marching in front of department stores that did not allow Black people to be served at the lunch counter, or did not hire Black people to work.

When working in movement offices, they would sing. When they were at mass meetings, they would sing for two hours. Freedom Riders sang on the bus. Folks sang in line as they prepared to register to vote.

People would sing in jail; separated by bars and walls, unable to see each other, but they could hear each other, and so they would sing.

The late, great Representative John Lewis was asked if they sang at the lunch counter, and he said, “Oh, no. When you’re at the sit-in, when you’re at that counter, you’re quiet. You read a book, or you look ahead. You ordered, and then you waited. And then, when we got arrested, we were carried out...But once we got in the paddy wagon, we made it rock!”²

And there is something about singing. Something that chanting slogans or shouting alone just can’t accomplish. It’s something that Moses and Miriam knew; for it was part of their faith. It’s something that those who sang the protest songs, the freedom songs knew and say they learned in church.

² *Freedom Songs*, Kate Becker, Boston University
<https://www.bu.edu/articles/2016/civil-rights-movement-freedom-songs/>

In the midst of a world full of shouting and chaos, a world that tries to overpower with its mumbling and mayhem; the people of God can overcome it with song.

You see, singing together, in a community, is more than just feel good—though it does feel good.

As we sing in unison, we all breathe together, speed up and slow down our heart beats together—and scientists tell us that our minds immediately begin to trust those around us—our bodies bond with one another and we move as one unit—breathing, beating, trusting as one. You would be hard pressed to find any other activity that unites our bodies and trust like singing.

Even more so, singing together brings home the we-ness of this life, the not-alone-ness of life in God. We aren’t alone. When we sing together, the blending of our voices reminds us of that. The variety of voices -- high-pitched or low-pitched, on-key or off-key, some soaring to the rafters and others barely above a whisper—our voices rising and falling together—lungs

breathing, hearts bearing as one, reminds us that we are not in the life, in this work, alone. We do so together. Whats more: when the days come—and they do—when you can't bare to bring yourself to sing, because the fear and despair is too much—others will carry you with their voices until you can sing anew.

Martin Luther King Jr claimed that freedom songs played a strong and vital role in the struggle. They kept alive a faith, a radiant hope in the future. Singing was the antidote to fear for those who marched, and sat, and worked for the cause of justice.

They sang songs of hope and freedom. They sang songs reminding them of the plight of the Israelites in Egypt and how God made the waters part in order to bring them to freedom. And as they sang, they realized that they too were walking through the Sea heading towards redemption, rest, liberty, all the while knowing that the walls of water might fall in upon them.

And often they did. Walls of water from fire hoses sprayed on those seeking equal education and

voting rights, or simply the ability to use a water fountain or sit at a lunch counter.

Walls of water made manifest by the hangman's noose as innocent people were lynched on trees, "strange fruit" that no one dared touch. Walls of water, taking the form of soldiers and police blocking the entrance to schools buildings and buses.

And yet, even as the walls of water trembled around them, the people sang. With loud voices and tambourine, they sang. And their songs, their collective voices in harmony and in unison, gave them courage and strength in the face of fear.

Sing to God! God is our strength and song. Keep your eyes on the prize. Hold on. Sing out, march on. Victory is ours. Amen.