



St. George, Ft. Langley: April 24, 2016

Psalm 98

Sing to the LORD a new song,
for he has done marvelous things.

Acts 13:44-52

The next Sabbath almost the whole city gathered to hear the word of the Lord.* But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy; and blaspheming, they contradicted what was spoken by Paul. Then both Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly, saying, ‘It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken first to you. Since you reject it and judge yourselves to be unworthy of eternal life, we are now turning to the Gentiles. For so the Lord has commanded us, saying,

“I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles,
so that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.”

When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and praised the word of the Lord; and as many as had been destined for eternal life became believers. Thus the word of the Lord spread throughout the region. But the Jews incited the devout women of high standing and the leading men of the city, and stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their region. So they shook the dust off their feet in protest against them, and went to Iconium. And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.

“Sing to the Lord a new song.”

My heart always soars when the psalm appointed for the day has this phrase somewhere in it. My heart always soars because, well, I like the idea that when God seems to be doing a new thing in our lives we respond with a song of praise. Add to this, nature, itself praising God—rivers clapping their hands and hills ringing out with joy—and what’s not to love?

But....consider what it’s like, my friends, in our own lived experience when we, you and I, are asked to sing a *completely* new song in response to a *completely* new thing that God is doing, something that surprises our expectations, something that asks us to expand our consciousness, something that

demands that we see ourselves and others in a new way, something that asks us to surrender old patters and to do new things. If you're at all like me, your heart does anything but soar at the prospect of such a new thing. No, instead, it sinks, it limps, it jolts, it sputters, it backfires and it winces. And so, as wonderful as singing a joyful song sounds as a way to respond to God's doing a completely new thing in our lives, our real experience may be that when the new actually comes, it can bring with it a sense of threat, a feeling of disorientation and more than a little resistance.

This is what I see writ large in our story from Acts this morning. For in this story Paul and Barnabas announce something entirely new—that the love of God is not just for a select group but it is for a group previously believed to be unacceptable to that select group—and instead of embracing this new thing, the select group, does all in its power to resist it.

In our story from the book of Acts it is the Sabbath. Huge crowds have gathered to hear the good news that in Christ, the love of God has moved beyond the Jews to the Gentiles. In response to this, however, the Jews, Luke tells us, become jealous when they see just how many Gentiles are in attendance and when they hear Paul and Barnabas preaching this more expansive Gospel message. But Paul and Barnabas will not be pressured to change what they know to be true. And so as a result, God's expansive love in Christ is preached, Gentiles become believers and the Jews run Paul and Barnabas out of town. Despite their rough experience at the hands of the Jews, Luke tells us that the disciples end up being “filled with joy and the Holy Spirit.”

As we think about this story, it would, of course, be easy to demonize the perspective and actions of the Jews in this story, situating ourselves with the Gentiles and those who are marginalized by established religious systems. But what I would suggest this morning, on this parish's patronal feast, is that we take the *entire story* into ourselves, making it ours both as individuals and as the whole community of St. George's. What I would suggest is that we, individually and as a whole parish, become *all* the characters in this story, doing this in order to feel the claim of God on us in the same way that George, soldier and martyr must have felt it. We take all this on as he did in order to engage in the deep engagement and in the holy struggle that is a mark of the work of the Spirit in the lives of the saints.

And so this morning we will be *all* the characters—individually and as a community:

We will be the Jews, full of their entitlement as the chosen people, a group of people who have a lot to lose in letting something or someone new in, a group that deftly engineers a way to get rid of any messengers announcing that others will now belong, that others will now share their sense of worth and their power.

We will be the Gentiles, those who never dreamed they would be given a place at the table with those God deems worthy of acceptance and power.

And, finally, we will be Paul and Barnabas, the plain-speaking but vulnerable messengers who have come to announce something challenging to those who are entitled and something astonishing to those who never considered themselves worthy.

And, so, first, consider yourself—where are you experiencing your very own Paul and Barnabas in your life, voices within you or within your life that are trying to get a message through to you that

the place you occupy, the power you have, has never just been for you alone, but is something that you must give away to others?

Where are you experiencing reactions like the reactions of the Jews in this story? Where are you so fully settled in your entitlement, so threatened by sharing power with others that you would not only work to undercut the voices of your Paul and Barnabas but would go to great efforts to banish them?

And finally, who or what in yourself or in your life are the Gentiles? Who or what has been ignored, or neglected but, for the good of the totality of who you are, deserves to be respected, invited in and given a voice?

And to the community of St. George's on this your patronal feast:

Where in this community are the voices of Paul and Barnabas alive and speaking with both a plain directness and vulnerability, asking that which is entrenched and powerful to yield its power and place to something or someone new?

Where is there deep entrenchment here at St. George's? What is the power of this entrenchment about? In what ways might this place of entrenchment be dismissing the voices of Paul and Barnabas or even running them out of town because, perhaps, there is just too much to lose should something entirely new come into being?

And finally where is that new energy, that neglected idea, that is worthy to be let in and seated at the table? Where are your Gentiles, so to speak, the idea or effort that is waiting to be noticed, gathered in and given the time, attention and power so that God's realm might be expanded beyond where it currently is?

"Sing to the Lord a new song," The psalmist says, "For he has done marvelous things."

The key, it seems to me, to being able to sing to the Lord a new song in the middle of personal or parish situations in which we, like the ancient church, have to struggle between entrenchment and a new and expansive understanding of who or what belongs at the table, the key, it seems to me, is our catching just a glimpse, just a glimpse, that in all of this, what God is trying to give us all is joy: the kind of joy that comes when, to our surprise, it is actually more intriguing, more satisfying, more life-giving and more inspiring to be swept up in the vision that God has for the world: the vision of one large, and I would say, round, table at which rich and poor, righteous and sinners, young and old, insiders and outsiders, long-timers and newcomers, liberals and conservatives, Palestinians and Israelis, Muslims and Christians, Paul, Barnabas, Jews and Gentiles will be seated together. What a loud, beautiful, and joyful table that will be.

And so this morning, people of St. George's, sing to the Lord a new song. Sing to the Lord for God has done and is doing marvelous things here. God is breaking open the places of entrenchment and entitlement and is bringing in that which has been forgotten or overlooked. And this is for the sake of joy, for the sake of our joy.