

CMCL
The Significance of Sung Worship
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Luke 1:46-55 (Mary's song)

A preacher was completing a temperance sermon: with great expression he said, "If I had all the beer in the world, I'd take it and throw it into the river." With even greater emphasis, he said, "And if I had all the wine in the world, I'd take it and throw it into the river." And then, finally, he said, "And if I had all the whiskey in the world, I'd take it and throw it into the river." He sat down.

The song leader then stood very cautiously and announced with a pleasant smile, "For our closing song, let us sing Hymn #365: 'Shall We Gather At the River.'"

Thanks for inviting me to join you this morning. I'm honored to be able to share with you a bit about my approach to sung worship. I offer these words and tunes to you humbly. I care about sung worship, but I recognize that the way I write, arrange, and lead is not the only way or even the best way. So, while I hope that you find something meaningful in what I have to offer, I am not offended if it's not your cup of tea.

I believe strongly that our sung worship matters. It matters to God, and it matters in our lives of faith. We're reading Mary's song out of season, obviously, but it's significant that the first thing Mary does, upon receiving the life-changing news that she would bear the son of God, is sing. I like to imagine her humming the song to herself when the infant Jesus woke her up for the fifth time overnight, or when he spit up all over the shirt she had just washed, reminding herself of this gift. Even now, this song serves as a testament to us, a reminder of the ways in which God was faithful to Mary and continues to be faithful to us.

This morning I am going to share a bit of my songwriting story, and we'll revisit Mary's song. We will also sing some examples of my songwriting and arranging.

I regularly participate in a couple different types of worship gatherings. One is a fairly typical Mennonite context: we drive in from a variety of places, sit in pews, and sing everything from modern praise and worship music with a full band to a capella hymns from the dark blue hymnal. Many of us grew up in the Mennonite church. Many of us have good educations and middle class sensibilities.

Another gathering is made up of people who live in the community around the church building. On Tuesday nights we sit around tables, have a brief time of input and prayer, and then eat together. For many, this is their first experience of church. Many live in poverty. Some have not finished high school. We often sing familiar tunes by ear, because many of these friends do not read music, let alone four-part harmony. We take requests, and often the homemade percussion instruments that the kids play drown out the voices that are singing.

Both these gatherings are worship. Both are highly participatory, but in very different ways. And both have led me to ask questions about the songs we sing in gathered worship. When it comes to the modern praise and worship music that we sometimes sing on Sunday mornings, the challenge is to sort out songs that are too complicated for lay musicians to lead or for an entire congregation to sing, or that articulate theology that is not Anabaptist, or that are simply boring or poorly written. When it comes to hymns, I find that people who didn't grow up singing, like my friends who gather on Tuesday nights, four part harmony find them inaccessible, and the ancient prose can be difficult to soak in if you don't have a college education or if English is not your first language.

I love singing hymns. And I think there is some really great modern praise and worship music out there. But I think we also need some alternatives. This is why, for the past eleven years, I have focused my songwriting almost exclusively on gathered worship.

My goals in writing for gathered worship are to create songs that are simple, beautiful, communal, theologically Anabaptist, and adaptable for a variety of contexts and musicians. I think we need music that is accessible but that doesn't sacrifice depth and beauty. I think we need music that is participatory and uses communal language. We need music that articulates Anabaptist theology.

We're going to sing a couple songs that illustrate the ways I am working at this. I want to name again that I am one voice in this conversation. I offer these as one attempt at orienting us toward God through song.

Together

The song Together emerged from a theological disagreement that I had with several congregants when I was pastoring at Sunnyside Mennonite Church. These folks were people in my own congregation, who I cared about, but with whom I disagreed.

Out of that experience I felt God inviting me to what I started calling confident humility – this idea that my opinion and interpretation was valid, but that I also needed to create space for the dissenters. To stay in relationship with them and love them. To discover what I might learn from them.

It was out of this “aha” moment that Together was born. I believe that our sung worship has the power to shape our identity, to shape how we look at one another. Together invites us to surrender to God, be open to those who see things differently than we do, and lift our own voice in confident humility. When we look at others wondering what we can learn from them, rather than how we can challenge them or correct them or fix them, our communities grow closer and stronger. I'm grateful that this song has spoken to many people in the broader Mennonite church as we experience significant tension. Our sung worship has the power to shape our identity.

Mary seems to have quickly realized the identity-shaping power of the news that the angel Gabriel brought her. She sings, “From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is God's name.” Mary's song acknowledges that people will look at her differently from now on because of this call from God. The words of her song continue to shape the way we look at Mary, and I believe the words we sing in worship shape the way we look at one another.

Together is arranged in four verses, so it leans on the Anabaptist hymn-singing tradition. This song has been used around the Mennonite church in a variety of settings. If you don't know the song already, hopefully you can join in by verse two or three.

Lord Have Mercy

On January 19, 2017, I got the worst phone call of my life. My mom called to tell me that my sister Hannah and her husband Caleb had been in a terrible car accident, hit head-on when a driver crossed four lanes of traffic at 75 miles an hour. Hannah died instantly, and Caleb continues to recover today. This experience of trauma and loss is wildly disorienting. It reshapes your life, your family, and your theology.

In this past year I have come to realize that we have very few songs that express pain, loss, and lament well. Even more, some songs we sing in worship can be unintentional triggers for people who have experienced significant pain and loss. So I have been writing more songs recently that express these things, as honestly as possible, to God.

Lord Have Mercy acknowledges that in times of deep pain we often run out of words. We come to the end of our sense of control or our understanding of how life works. My prayer life for the past year has consisted primarily of the words “Lord have mercy.” The great thing is that we have songs in scripture that express pain clearly and honestly; this song leans on Psalm 86.

I believe that we need more songs that express lament and pain because singing has the power to shape our theology, the way we look at God. God is well acquainted with our pain, even experiencing it alongside us. God wants us to be honest about what we're experiencing, and singing our lament reminds us that God is not distant and removed from our reality. Singing honest songs to God has the power to draw us closer to God.

Even in her song of joy and praise, Mary acknowledges God's special attention to and presence with those who are struggling, as well as God's frustration with those who pretend to have it all together. God exalts the humble, she sings. God fills the hungry and sends the rich away empty. God scatters the proud. Mary's song continues the biblical narrative that emphasizes God's special concern for those on the margins, those who are down and out, those who know they don't have it all together. This is her story, after all. Her story, and this particular song, continue to shape the way people look at God, and I think our modern sung worship has the power to do the same.

Lord Have Mercy...repetition...entering into contemplation, expressing something too deep for words

Come Thou Fount

I think we do well to consider how we use hymns in worship, as we think about creating worship experiences that honor Anabaptist tradition and are welcoming to those from the margins of church. Our challenge and invitation is to find ways to hold onto the Anabaptist tradition of hymn singing that is inviting to those who didn't grow up in the church or singing four-part harmony. The beauty of this tradition is that it is inclusive at its core: hymn singing invites everyone to contribute their voice to create sounds that are greater than any one person could create on their own. This way of singing is inherently participatory and creates a level playing field for leader and congregation. I think that is beautiful. I think that's what we need to hold onto.

I've been working at reclaiming hymns in a number of ways. I want to be clear that I do not believe we need to do away entirely with acapella hymn singing. Rather, I hope to provide some alternative options that can supplement the hymn singing that many of us deeply appreciate. I've worked at this by adding instrumentation to hymns, or inserting a chorus from another song between each verse.

I also tinker with paraphrasing words of hymns while keeping the original tune. I work exclusively with hymns that are old enough to be in the public domain, and re-write their words using modern language but keeping the original meaning, similar to Eugene Peterson's work with *The Message*.

Mary spends the better part of her song naming what God has done in the past: performed mighty deeds, brought down rulers, filled the hungry, extended mercy. This is the foundation for her proclamation of trust in what God will continue to do in the future: be mindful of her, and bless her and future generations. She allows the past to shape her, to impact her faith in this moment of great significance. I think our tradition of hymn-singing holds similar power: singing ancient songs of faith can increase our faith today. When we sing we are reminded of the faithfulness of those who have gone before us, and hopefully inspired and strengthened. The challenge for us is to find ways to join those ancient songwriters and be open and inviting to people who didn't grow up in the church or who can't sing four-part harmony. I worship with people who don't read music, even some who don't read at all, and many who don't understand or appreciate ancient poetry.

We're going to sing my paraphrase of *Come Thou Fount*. I added a chorus to this arrangement, so I will teach that to you first, then we will sing that chorus in between each verse. The melody and harmonies are all the same as the original hymn.

Conclusion

Our sung worship matters. Like Mary's song, it has the power to shape how we look at one another, how we look at God, and to increase our trust in God's presence and activity. May we each have the courage to add our voice or instrument to the song, and may it be pleasing to God's ears. Amen.

Together

I will sing with you, my brother
Will you sing with me
I will sing with you, my brother
Will you sing with me
The notes won't always come out as I'd like
But I will learn to see the log in my own eye
Lord, I'll surrender
Bring us together
Bring us together

I will sing with you, my sister
Will you sing with me
I will sing with you, my sister
Will you sing with me
My words will be imperfect
but I'll try

Bringing my assumptions
to the light, I'll pray
Lord, I'll surrender
Bring us together
Bring us together

I will sing with you, my rival
Will you sing with me
I will sing with you, my rival
Will you sing with me
Difference is a place
where God is found
In seeking peace we're walking onto holy ground
Lord, we surrender
Bring us together
Bring us together

We will sing our song together
Sing in harmony
We will sing our song together
Whether two or three
Jesus feels our pain, he sets us free
God has given us this song of hope to sing
Lord, we surrender
Bring us together
Bring us together
Bring us together
Bring us together

Lord Have Mercy

These prayers ring with urgency
Lord, turn your ear
We can't say just what we need
Our words are scarce
You are our God
You lift us up

Lord have mercy, here we are
Have mercy on us all
Lord have mercy, in these storms
Let peace make landfall
When we've reached the end of what we know
When we've reached the end of our control
Lord have mercy
Lord have mercy
Lord have mercy
Lord have mercy

You are our God
You are our strength
You lift us up
To glimpse a new day

Come Thou Fount

Come surround us with your love
Come forgive us, cleanse our hearts
Come inspire us, make us move
Lord of all, we sing to you

Come thou fount of each new blessing
Let us sing your song of grace
Soak us in your flood of mercy
As we lift our song of praise
May we sing with one another
Melodies you long to hear
Your great song of love, it rises
Driving out our every fear

We are filled with Jesus' Spirit
Only by your help we move
And we're trusting in the promise
That you're making all things new
Seek us out, Lord, when we wander
For you call the stranger, friend
You will rescue and protect us
By your power, to the end

Our days are filled with grace, Lord
And your grace is what we need
Won't you take our hand in your hand
Draw us in and grant us peace
On our own we only wander
On our own, we're lost at sea
We surrender all we are now
When you hold us, we are free