

"A New Song" – January 18, 2015

Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 40:1-3

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When I was a child I liked to write stories. This hobby of mine took off in junior high school when I started creating poems and longer stories. In the ninth grade I had one story that I had worked on for a few months. Each day I would bring in a snippet of it to my English teacher to read, and she encouraged me to keep at it. She was supportive of my interest in writing, and she was certain that I would one day be a writer of novels.

In high school my interest moved from writing stories to writing music. I started with short little tunes for my friends to perform, and I quickly gained the attention of my high school band director. Like my junior high English teacher, he saw my talent and encouraged me to write more and gave me opportunities to have the compositions performed during school concerts. His encouragement and my talent led to my becoming a music composition major in college.

Now on the surface, writing stories and writing music don't seem that dissimilar. Both require creativity and some innate talent. Each one requires a grasp of some basic skills and the ability to mold language into something new and different. In writing stories I used the language of words to get my message across. In music, I had to utilize the language of melody, harmony and rhythm to accomplish the task. And here is where the two acts of creativity begin to move in different directions.

In writing stories, once the word is on the page, nothing will change it. The written word is static. Black ink on a white background. The writer is finished and awaits the reader to come along and take in the words. The writer is in complete control over what the readers read. Music, on the other hand, is somewhat open-ended. True, the composer writes the notes on a page, but until the music is performed, it has no life, no meaning. And in many ways the composer is at the mercy of the performer to bring the music to life.

I remember how thrilling it was to hear other people perform my music. To think that they were actually playing something that I wrote. It was an amazing feeling, to know I had created something, and someone else was giving it life. But I quickly learned the plight of the composer – that of having no control over the performer. Mistakes were made, wrong notes were played, and rhythms were inaccurate. Each time I heard "my music" played wrong – played differently than the way I heard it in my head, it was a blow to both my ego and to my sense of right-ness. I thought a bad performance reflected poorly on me.

There was one particular performance that forever remains seared onto my memory. In college I had written a woodwind trio that had actually won a composition contest. A few years later, it was to be performed again, but by a different trio. The clarinet part was quite difficult, having been written with the talents of the original performer in mind. The new trio wanted to play the piece, and although

the clarinetist was a freshman, he was quite talented. However, he neglected to rehearse enough with the trio, and during the performance, he kept getting lost in the music. The performance was a disaster, and I was livid.

I eventually learned to give up control of my music. Once I had written a piece, I had to trust someone else to play it. I had to allow the musicians to take over and interpret as they saw fit, for good or for ill. Even though I had created the song, the music, it was still just notes on a page until someone else came along to play it, to give it life.

This talent I had for writing stories and for composing music helped me to understand God, long before I became a follower of Christ. As a teenager, I could understand God as Creator. The idea of being able to create something, to make something that prior to the act of creating it had no existence, made sense to me. I knew that my talent came from beyond myself. I knew the gifts of writing and composing came from the Ultimate Creator, the One who created everything.

The lesson from Genesis chapter one points to God as the Creator. The text tells us that prior to God's action, there was no world. No sky, no seas, no mountains, no birds or animals, no people. Nothing. In the beginning, there was only God. So one of the first things we learn about God, is that God is Creator. God has a hankering to make stuff. And every time God made something new, God pronounced it as good. A little later in the same chapter, God chose to make humans, the crown of creation. And when God stepped back to take it all in, God decided that it wasn't just good, it was very good. I don't think it would be a stretch for us to admit that God got satisfaction from creation – both the act and the result of that act.

I want to look a more closely at the second verse of the first chapter of Genesis. It says that "the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters." I like to think of it like this. That before God started refining the pieces and parts of Creation, God started out by creating the stuff of creation. God first built the building blocks. Think of it like this. When a child is playing with Play-doh, it starts out as a lump of brightly-colored clay from a little canister. The child take the stuff and forms it into whatever he or she desires. The child take the lump of clay, and envisions what I could become.

So there was this "formless void" and "darkness" and "water." There was chaos, that had no rhyme or reason. Aside from God's creative purpose, it had no function, it was simply a chaotic mess. Working from that chaos, God first created light and then order, until finally ending by creating beings who were in God's own image, each having that spark of creativity within them.

Now we know the next chapter of the story. Adam, Eve, serpent, tree and apple. Are you with me? What started out as being very good, suddenly takes a sharp turn. Now this is where I get back to my opening analogy. God could have written a story. Words on a page, with no chance for change.

Creation and humanity could have followed a specific script planned by God from the beginning of all creation.

But instead, God wrote a song. We have been given notes on a page by the ultimate composer, and we are the performers. Each one of us has been given a song to sing, and God has turned over the control of that song to each of us. How are we to perform it? We can play the notes on the page, and follow the instructions written in the music staff. Or we can choose to follow the beat of a different drum. Our life is the performance of the song God has written.

As a composer, God has given us the freedom to sing the song in our own way. For good or for ill. We make mistakes, we play wrong notes, and sometimes we get lost in the music. Sometimes we get so off track, we lose sight of the musical score altogether and begin to play something completely different. Chaos often results.

Psalms 40 opens with an image of the psalmist in a desperate situation. Times were rough, and the psalmist felt completely hopeless. In his desperation he turned to God for guidance and help. It didn't come immediately, and so he waited, believing that God would eventually hear him. And God did. God pulled him out of his pit of despair and set him down on solid footing. God gave him a firm foundation. The psalmist wrote these words, "God put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear and put their trust in the Lord."

Many of us can understand the feeling of desperation that the psalmist felt. Perhaps right now in our own lives, a sense of uneasiness has taken up residence. In some situations, it could even border on panic or depression, wondering how or if we'll ever make it over the hurdles that have suddenly blocked our way. Some face health problems, others concern over finances, and many of us simply wonder about the uncertainty in the world around us. We want to trust that things will get better in time – that's what everyone tells us – but we wonder how much worse things might get first. Or maybe there is no chance of things getting better, and instead we must learn to accept the new normal. So like the psalmist, we reach out to God for help, for support. And maybe like the psalmist, God has not answered us yet. God has not responded as quickly as we might have hoped. We try to trust that God will eventually answer.

The music has gone off key, the harmonies have become discordant, the song doesn't sound at all right. We find ourselves off track, floundering in the midst of bad news, chronic health problems, estranged relationships, tragic loss, or financial burdens. We long to be restored to health and stability and security. Can we hope in God? Dare we look to our Creator to somehow make things right?

From Genesis, one of the first things we learn is that God is a God of order. God took the stuff of chaos – the formless void, the darkness, the deep – and turned it into a world full of light and life. God took chaos and formed it into something good, something very good. And when God came to

the psalmist, who was in a pit of despair, God pulled him from that pit, and put a new song on his lips. Order from disorder. Harmony from discord.

This idea of being given a new song to sing is found throughout scripture. Many of the psalms use this imagery, for example – “O sing to the Lord a new song (Ps 96).” It is also found in Isaiah and in Revelation. There is this theme that God will restore what has become discordant. When the song goes bad, God will give a new song. That is good news. God is not just the Creator, giving us a world, giving us life, and then leaving us to fend for ourselves. God is also the Redeemer, the One who gives new life through the person of Jesus Christ. Restoring us to right relationship with God and with one another. God is also Sustainer, by the power of the Holy Spirit, giving us a firm foundation on which to stand and providing us the strength to endure.

So we seek a new song to sing. We want a life in harmony with God. We seek order from chaos, stability from instability. Perhaps we don't need something completely different, just a push back on track. Something to bring us back to God.

One particular type of music is called theme and variations. As you might imagine from its name, the music starts with a statement of the main theme. Following that comes a series of variations. The theme is still present throughout the music, but even variation adds something new, something different. It could be a brisker tempo, or slow way down. It could be a more intricate and complex, or the addition of other instruments, or even the addition of a new melody to intertwine with the original theme. Sometimes the theme may be presented backwards or inverted. The variation could be so extreme, you might not even recognize the theme, but it's still there.

And it think that is indicative of our lives. We each have a them, a statement of who we are, what God has created us to be. As our paths progress we experience variations on that theme. Some take us far away from the original path, while other variations ring true to the main theme. And then we reach those times in our lives were the theme has grown stale. We look to God to give us a new song, a new variation. We have an idea of where God wants us to be. We just need to try to live our lives in harmony with God's purpose for the world. Even in the midst of troubling times, the song continues. And God offers us a variation to help us through.

God has given us a song to sing, this is true. But one final point to make. We are not all soloists, going our separate ways. Instead we are part of God's grand orchestra, working together to perform God's amazing composition. We do not compete for the spotlight, but we work together in community to support each other and help those around us. As we continue the song and learn new variations along the way, we share this song with others, inviting them to join their voices with ours.