



A five-part sermon series

Along the Journey: From Struggling So Hard to Singing New Songs

Warwick Central Baptist Church

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I will sing of your steadfast love, O LORD, forever;
with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations.
I declare that your steadfast love is established forever;
your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens.
You said, “I have made a covenant with my chosen one,
I have sworn to my servant David:
‘I will establish your descendants forever, and build your throne for all generations.’”
Happy are the people who know the festal shout,
who walk, O LORD, in the light of your countenance;
they exult in your name all day long, and extol your righteousness.
For you are the glory of their strength; by your favor our horn is exalted.
For our shield belongs to the LORD, our king to the Holy One of Israel.

Psalm 89:1-4, 15-18

One of the stories told by the desert Christians of the second century involves a group of seekers from the city. These seekers traveled to ask a local monk how to seek union with God.

The wise monk replied, “The harder you seek, the more distance you create between God and you.”

“So what does one do about the distance?” the seekers asked.

The monk simply said, “Just understand that it isn’t there.”

One seeker inquired, “Does that mean God and I are one?”

“Not one. Not two,” said the monk.

“But how is that possible?” the seekers insisted.

The monk answered, “Just like the sun and its light, the ocean and the wave, the singer and the song. Not one. But not two.”

What if the early desert Christians were right? What if the search for God doesn’t need to be as hard as we sometimes make it? What might imagining ourselves as close to God as a song is to the singer do for us?

Perhaps we could stop searching so hard. Perhaps we simply could allow our lives to be the songs God wishes to sing in the world.

If we listen to our lives right now, what songs do we hear? Do we hear songs that are honest and loving and challenging and hopeful? Or do we hear songs that are filled with fear or regret or despair or resentment?

Can we feel God singing through our lives? Or do other voices sound more loudly? Those of family members—even from long ago. Those of the expectations of others or ourselves. Those of old dreams that won't let us go.

Are the songs of our lives new and evolving? Or are we tied to the same old songs—year after year?

Martin Luther, the father of the Reformation, said: “A Christian's being is in becoming.” As Christians, our “becoming is a continual repentance, a continual new start in a new direction. It is a new start from sin to [justice], from slavery to freedom, from doubt to faith, and from past to future.”

If Luther is right, we're to keep singing new songs. God keeps bringing us into new places, connecting us with new people, offering us new challenges, drawing us into new depths of love. If we open ourselves to this newness and allow it to change us, then God will keep singing new songs through us.

This belief lies behind the psalm we heard this morning. This psalm rings with praise and thanks for God's steadfast love. It also celebrates the covenant relationship that God initiated with David and promised to continue with David's descendants.

One commentator notes that the psalm's key words of *steadfast love* and *covenant* “form one of the most powerful theological tag-teams in the Psalter, because both words have to do with God's character. The first word goes to God's internal character and testifies that at heart, God is a faithful God—this is God's nature. The second word goes to the external actions of God and testifies that God is faithful to the promises God makes.”

But there seems to be a problem with this psalm. By the time the Psalter was completed after the exile, it had been more than 500 years since a descendant of David had sat on a throne. Why did the people of Israel retain this and other royal psalms? Wasn't that simply trying to sing an old song?

Maybe there's another way to approach and hear this song. Perhaps the psalm reminds us that despite the specific details of human history, the promise of God's love and of God's desire for relationship with us continues to come to us in new and changing ways.

Maybe this is how we allow our lives to become new songs. Perhaps this is how we avoid the trap of trying to keep singing the same song even though it's long past time to let go of it and let God bring a new tune to being through us.

If we believe that God embraces us with a deep and steadfast love, then we can trust that God will fill our lives with new songs. If we believe that God desires to be in an ongoing relationship with us, then we can allow that relationship to define and shape the songs we'll sing.

Sonny was a fireman in Boston. His father had been a fireman, and both of his sons, Tom and Pat, also wanted to be firemen.

Sonny helped his sons learn what it would take to get jobs as fire fighters. It's what Sonny wanted most for his sons.

But in 1974 those dreams were shattered. A judge ruled that the hiring process used by the Boston Fire Department was unconstitutional. Twenty-three percent of the residents

of Boston were people of color, while fewer than one percent of the fire fighters were people of color.

The judge pointed to a consistent pattern of discrimination in hiring within the fire department. As a result of the judge's ruling, for the near future whites would be hired as fire fighters only if they were veterans or if a family member has been killed in service as a fire fighter.

While all these changes were taking place, Sonny's wife developed breast cancer and died. She was only 51.

The song Sonny had been singing was suddenly silenced. His wife was dead. He felt betrayed by his government, because its policies meant his sons wouldn't be able to follow in his footsteps.

Sonny couldn't admit that his song wasn't going to come true. Nor could he imagine singing a new song. Everything around Sonny had changed in painful and disappointing ways, but he tried to keep his song the same. Unfortunately, the singers of his song became bitterness, anger, and despair. He turned to alcohol. More and more it was the bartender who heard Sonny's old song.

But things were different for Sonny's son Tom. As his father was losing his life by sticking to a song that needed to die, Tom was moving on. Although he'd spent years preparing himself to become a fire fighter, Tom knew he had more than one song in him. If he couldn't join the fire department, then he needed to imagine something else.

Tom realized that one of the reasons he'd wanted to become a fire fighter was so he could work with real people in his city and help people who were in crisis. So he began to look for other jobs that might provide a way to follow his call.

Tom learned that ambulance companies in Boston were hiring. So he trained to be an emergency medical technician. He ended up working in one of the poorest parts of the city where Boston's highest concentration of people of color lived.

He didn't see them as the people who'd kept him from getting the job he'd dreamed of—which is how his father chose to see them. Instead, Tom saw them as people who needed what he could offer—and maybe as people who could help heal him. But for that to happen, Tom knew he had to let his dream die and make room for a new song to be born.

The power and potential power of singing a new song also shaped another life.

This boy wasn't the son of a fire fighter. Instead he was born into a musical family. His parents took him on the road in the late '20s and early '30s to bring music to the people. The boy discovered that people across the country were making music of their own, and he came to believe that music could be a force for good.

As the boy grew into a man, he chose to follow in his parents' steps. He too would be a musician. He wrote powerful songs and joined with a group of other musicians to perform those songs.

But then things began to change. Fear swept the United States, and this boy-turned-man found himself placed on a list of artists who were banned from performing in most places during the dark days of the Red Scare.

But Pete Seeger refused to stop singing. He simply found a new song. He sang it as he played for children. He sang it as he invented a new kind of banjo that helped bring about a rebirth of that instrument. He sang it as he co-founded two folk-song magazines. He sang

it as he and his wife of more than sixty years committed themselves to living a “green” lifestyle—even living in a cabin he built for their family.

Seeger’s life didn’t follow the path he’d imagined. Yet he was able to embrace the change he experienced and make room for a new song.

This morning as we consider the songs of our lives, perhaps the lyrics of one of Seeger’s songs can provide us with inspiration:

Words, words, words
In my old Bible
How much of truth remains?
If I only understood them,
While my lips pronounced them,
Would not my life be changed?

Words, words, words
In Tom’s old Declaration
How much of truth remains?
If I only understood them,
While my lips pronounced them,
Would not my life be changed?

Words, words, words
In my old songs and stories
How much of truth remains?
If I only understood them,
While my lips pronounced them,
Would not my life be changed?

Words, words, words
On cracked old pages
How much of truth remains?
If my mind could understand them,
And if my life pronounced them,
Would not this world be changed?

As we continue along our journeys of faith, may we be willing to move away from anything that keeps us from singing new songs—whether that be searching too hard for God or clinging to old songs that no longer hold life.

Instead, may we be open to the new words God may inspire in the songs of our lives. And may those words and our songs help change the world. Amen.