

Singing a New Song

^{CEB} **Luke 2:1** In those days Caesar Augustus declared that everyone throughout the empire should be enrolled in the tax lists. ² This first enrollment occurred when Quirinius governed Syria. ³ Everyone went to their own cities to be enrolled. ⁴ Since Joseph belonged to David's house and family line, he went up from the city of Nazareth in Galilee to David's city, called Bethlehem, in Judea. ⁵ He went to be enrolled together with Mary, who was promised to him in marriage and who was pregnant. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for Mary to have her baby. ⁷ She gave birth to her firstborn child, a son, wrapped him snugly, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the guestroom. ⁸ Nearby shepherds were living in the fields, guarding their sheep at night. ⁹ The Lord's angel stood before them, the Lord's glory shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ The angel said, "Don't be afraid! Look! I bring good news to you--wonderful, joyous news for all people. ¹¹ Your savior is born today in David's city. He is Christ the Lord. ¹² This is a sign for you: you will find a newborn baby wrapped snugly and lying in a manger." ¹³ Suddenly a great assembly of the heavenly forces was with the angel praising God. They said, ¹⁴ "Glory to God in heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors."

For many people, it's hard to have the Christmas spirit that we think we ought to have, the Christmas spirit that many of us want to have. By tonight, many folks are exhausted. They've decorated, traveled, cooked, and shopped until they've dropped. Others are fretting about the gifts that they're giving: How will they be received? How will they ever be paid for? Some worry about whether certain family members will spoil the day for others in the family. There are so many ways that Christmas can fail to live up to our hopes and expectations.

If that's happened over and over, people can become jaded and sour. They might dismiss the whole celebration of Christmas by pointing out that many of the Christian traditions around Christmas have pagan origins in the winter solstice celebrations. Well, that's true enough, but it doesn't diminish Christmas. Through time, Christians have stolen symbols and traditions from druids and others who would wail that we've diminished their holidays right into extinction.

Many today can't seem to find meaning in the Christmas story. The desire to worship Christ is shut out by idol worship. Devotion to the idols of power, of fame, of wealth, of technology, of desire, of fads, and of entertainment occupies time and energy and leaves no interest or attraction to worshipping a little peasant infant.

Music says a lot about how we think and what we feel. And there's a lot of music that's all about selfishness, about control of other people, about rage and revenge, and about how my tribe is better than your tribe. Music not only reflects who we are, it also influences who we are. It's a two-way street. In a day and age where music is the very personal experience delivered by ear buds or in the sealed environment of our car, we can overlook just how communal music really is. Drivers sing with their radios, concertgoers mime the words, and even people who claim not to be able to sing will tap their foot or move their finger or nod in time with the song. People form flash mobs to sing the Hallelujah Chorus or dance together to a piece of music that speaks deeply to them.

Centuries ago, The Israelites were a conquered and beaten down people. Their capital city was destroyed. Many of them were force-marched off to serve the people who defeated them. Everything had gone wrong. There was no hope, no future, no dream. A songwriter

whose name is lost in antiquity wrote a song. It was the right song for the times then. It's the right song for the times now.

^{CEB} **Psalm 96** Sing to the LORD a new song! Sing to the LORD, all the earth! ² Sing to the LORD! Bless his name! Share the news of his saving work every single day! ³ Declare God's glory among the nations; declare his wondrous works among all people ⁴ because the LORD is great and so worthy of praise. He is awesome beyond all other gods ⁵ because all the gods of the nations are just idols, but it is the LORD who created heaven! ⁶ Greatness and grandeur are in front of him; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary. ⁷ Give to the LORD, all families of the nations-- give to the LORD glory and power! ⁸ Give to the LORD the glory due his name! Bring gifts! Enter his courtyards! ⁹ Bow down to the LORD in his holy splendor! Tremble before him, all the earth! ¹⁰ Tell the nations, "The LORD rules! Yes, he set the world firmly in place; it won't be shaken. He will judge all people fairly." ¹¹ Let heaven celebrate! Let the earth rejoice! Let the sea and everything in it roar! ¹² Let the countryside and everything in it celebrate! Then all the trees of the forest too will shout out joyfully ¹³ before the LORD because he is coming! He is coming to establish justice on the earth! He will establish justice in the world rightly. He will establish justice among all people fairly.

Psalm 96 proclaims that God reigns – even at a time when it appears that God does not reign. Can we, shall we say, the Lord reigns, when the presence of all our idols seems so overpowering? The psalmist says we must. This is a Psalm of profound hope.

Sing a new song. Sing a song of hope. We live in an ever changing and mobile world. We live in uncertain times. So it's very good news that God's presence is unchanged and eternal. There is an anchor, a certainty, for us to hold onto.

Sing a new song. Sing that God is the God of all people and all creation. This Psalm says that God's sovereignty extends over all the nations. God's salvation isn't limited to any one people or nation. God delivers "good news of great joy for all the people" Luke 2:10. Psalm 96 is an invitation for the whole world to stand up and praise the Lord. What could be more appropriate on the night we celebrate the birth of Jesus as true sovereign? Joy to the world! Let heaven and nature sing!

Sing a new song! Sing a song about God's kingdom here and now. Too often we think the good news of God's reign is only about the future, as if that were the only place where it might even be believable. Tonight we welcome the arrival of a special baby who grew up to be an extraordinary man. He was Emmanuel, which means God with us. He was the very embodiment of God's love. He lived and taught righteousness, faithfulness, equity, fairness, compassion, and love. These are the qualities and actions of God's justice. These are the gifts wrapped up in swaddling cloth and lying in a manger. Look for true stories of salvation breaking in on the world, stories of justice and stability right here on earth. Look for stories where people are looking out for other people, even at the risk of their own safety. Look for random acts of kindness.

Sing a new song – not one of hate or violence or greed or despair. Sing a song of hope, a song that tells of God's unshakeable love, a song that tells about how Jesus calls us to follow in his footsteps. Just as he lived a life of compassion and caring, so are we to live. Sing a new song – with your lips and with your life! Amen.