

Sharing the Faith 2 Epiphany A

Your righteousness have I not hidden in my heart; I have spoken of your faithfulness and your deliverance;* I have not concealed your love and faithfulness from the great congregation. Psalm 40:11

For many, sharing our faith is next to public speaking. It makes us nervous. Just as caring for the homeless singing is a visible way for people to share the faith.

Kate Munger, the founder of an organization called the Threshold Choir, describes the songs its members sing at the bedsides of the dying. The website says, "We sing at bedsides. We have sung for people who are dying, people who are recovering, people in comas, and those recovering from comas. We have also sung for newborns in hospital intensive care units."

The Threshold Choir, which now has some 35 chapters in a dozen states, including Milwaukee, WI, began in 2000. It had its roots in an experience of Kate's 10 years earlier. She was helping to care for a friend who was in a coma and dying of AIDS. She spent the morning in his home doing housework, and in the afternoon, she began to sing to him, and continued doing so for two hours. She says, "The contrast between the morning and the afternoon [was] profound. I felt like I had really given generously of my essence to my dear friend while I sang to him. I also found that I felt deeply comforted myself, which I know in turn was comforting to him ... At the end of the afternoon, I felt like I had stumbled into something extraordinary."

Each of the chapters of the Threshold Choir now has between 60 and 80 members, but they go by invitation in groups of two or three to sing at the bedsides of seriously ill people, many of whom are in the final stages of life. They sing a cappella in homes, hospitals and hospices, selecting their music from a 300-piece repertoire of songs and hymns — numbers ranging from "Ave Maria" to "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" to "Calling All Angels." They do not charge for their services, but will accept donations to cover their expenses.

Some of the people for whom choir members have sung are hooked up to monitors, and frequently, as the singing begins, observers note that the patient's heartbeat steadies and the breathing becomes less labored. Occasionally, the patient later recovers, and some of them credit the singing as playing a role in their healing.

While Threshold Choir members have sung to people of various ages, most of their requests come from elderly people who are spending their last days at home. When the singing starts, the face of the dying person often softens, and there is a sense of relaxation taking place. Munger says that it's often a comforting moment, as when a mother softly croons a lullaby at the end of the day. Only here, she says, it is "at the end of a lovely, long life." Kate Munger says, "We think of these as lullabies for people on the way out."

Threshold Choir Web Site, www.thresholdchoir.org.

What an unexpected way to bring "good news" to other people who may have lived hearing the gospel preached but never hearing God's love and righteousness. Threshold Choirs are certainly proclaiming the word of God to those who because of sickness and being near death have become "poor in spirit." Jesus preached in his sermon on the mount, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God."

The Psalmist wrote in our scripture today, "He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God; * many shall see, and stand in awe, and put their trust in the LORD."

In the early verses of the psalm, he tells us that he had hit bottom. He doesn't describe the circumstances, but it was some difficulty so deep that he portrayed it as a "desolate pit" and the "mire and clay." But then he received the help of the Lord, and he experienced a transformation — from the mire in the bottom of the pit to solid footing of rock up in the land of the living. At that point, the psalmist said, God "put a new song in my mouth."

Psalm 40 is filled not only with the mention of pits and bog, but also with testimony about God and the benefit to those who rely upon him. A new song, is what Christianity is about. Christianity helps us to interpret life, whether in the midst of it or near its end, with a song that, if not always upbeat, at least has a joyous undertone.

The old hymn, *How Firm a Foundation*, talks about going through "deep waters," "rivers of woe" and "fiery trials," but it paraphrases Scripture in response, so that the words of the hymn are God's words. And God declares, in stanza after stanza, his abiding presence with us. The final verse says:

The soul that on Jesus still leans for repose,

I will not, I will not desert to its foes;

that soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake,

I'll never, no, never, no, never forsake.

Our hymns and songs provide strong words of encouragement and hope. They help to form the perspective from which Christians interpret life — and death. Perhaps that is the reason that Christmas carols draw so many to remember their childhood and their hope.

Melik Kaylan, a columnist for *The Wall Street Journal*, tells the story of a return visit to his native Turkey one December when he was involved in a serious car accident. (Kaylan, Melik. “Carols for convalescence.” *The Wall Street Journal*, December 22, 2000). His ribs were broken, several vital organs were damaged, and was comatose and near death when he arrived at a hospital in Istanbul. The doctors saved his life, but he spent weeks in the ICU, with fever much of the time.

Periodically, he came to consciousness long enough to realize that he'd been singing Christmas carols loudly enough for everyone to hear him. This was a real surprise to him because he thought he'd left all those songs, along with any religious interests, behind when he'd left the school where he was taught. He says that “an inner Wurlitzer-full of them came welling up” as he emerged from anesthetic, and they continued throughout his stay.

On one occasion, his fever spiked so high that a nurse placed an ice bag on his head. As he slowly became conscious of his surroundings, he noticed two other patients nearby, both middle-aged men with their heads bandaged. With the three of them all being crowned with dressings or ice bags, he discovered himself singing “We Three Kings of Orient Are.” Later, when a patient recovered enough to leave, “Away in a Manger” sprung from his lips unbidden.

And so it went. Later, recovered, Kaylan looked back and wrote:

... the carols ... purged and simplified my thoughts, helped me surrender to the healing process while surrendering to the carol's own inner metronome. Carols have the knack of transporting you back to the first moments you ever sang them, which tend to be times of optimism and wonder at the universe — exactly the outlook needed,

in such situations, to resurrect yourself successfully, without killing yourself in the process.

Once God puts that new song in our mouths, the song is always there. And whether we are consciously hearing it or not, and no matter what our present difficulties, it's singing to us of hope, confidence, redemption and spiritual affirmation.

Yet, not everybody likes to sing. And that's okay. There are songs that come with the faith. Songs we will remember for the rest of our lives.

God put a new song in your heart when you were baptized. Songs and hymns may get old but we need not forget the old tunes of our childhood. May God prepare us for that heavenly choir when together we will sing the song of salvation to our Redeemer Jesus Christ. Spiritual songs and hymns are but one way we can share our faith. They proclaim good news to all who hear. They give us handles in which we can share what we believe. They give others who see and hear hope. The psalmist declares: "I have not concealed your love and faithfulness from the great congregation." (Psalm 40:11) Amen