



“Gloria!”

1 John 4:7-16, Luke 2:14

A good while back I learned that singing, actively singing, both personally and in a group is a vanishing experience. Now you’d never know that judging from *American Idol*. Maybe FOX’s hit show will prove the scholars and anthropologists wrong. We can only hope. The theory is that modern man is too sophisticated to sing; that singing is a group response to suffering and oppression. Go exploring in the Library of Congress or the Smithsonian and I’m certain you’ll find cataloged collections of folk recordings from people long gone.

Communal song

Maybe you can remember C. B DeMille’s Israelites; carrying the remains of Joseph to the Promised Land, they left Egypt singing. Any notion we have of African slaves picking cotton in the old South comes with the genre of song called the Negro spiritual. In school we learned such classics as “Jump Down Turn Around,” “Kum By Ya,” “Swing Low Sweet Chariot,” and “Go Tell It on the Mountain.”

I’m glad what *they said* on that NPR program is not true in my case. I was a Boy Scout and around the campfire we told stories, toasted marshmallows, and sang. Often they were just silly songs, for the fun of it. Singing was something we just did even while hiking up a mountain. It bound us together. When I was in youth group we sang too; no one compelled us. Someone brought out a guitar and people readily joined in singing. Of course it was the 70s; we were all oppressed. My father made me get a hair cut, and mom wouldn’t let me go to church in Levis.

Today, in our sophistication, rather than make our own music we prefer to watch it on TV or listen to it. You see boys with their ear pieces. Song has ceased being a shared experience, now each one listens to his own tunes. The medium that once brought people together, now isolates us. It is one more sign of our disordered lives.

Ed Markquart fondly remembered his pastor, who couldn’t hold a tune for all the tea in China. Markquart writes how the man publicly scolded his organist for choosing a hymn he didn’t know. (One is inclined to imagine the musician’s response; if had done it, Laura would tell me “since when has that ever stopped you before?”)

Christmas carols may be the last communal singing opportunity

Most people come on Christmas Eve because they want to sing the carols they know and love.

For some the words speak to them of God's kindness and mercy, for some it's the nostalgia, and still for others it's the music. St. Augustine *may have* said, "he who sings, prays twice," but it was Martin Luther who saw the importance of marrying the words to specific melodies. And not just words, but the proclamation of *the Word, the Word made flesh*, –the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Luther called music the handmaiden of theology; she serves the Word carrying it passed our ears to our hearts. Some of us might fumble around for the right means of expressing the Faith, but we could do it if we had the right music.

If Laura would just start playing Greensleeves, some of you would start, "*This, this is Christ the king, whom shepherds laud and angels sing. Haste, haste to bring him laud, the Babe, the Son of Mary.*" If she played the melody called St. Louis, you would sing "*O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie. . .*" And, if she played Gloria, you'd know to start singing, "*Angels we have heard on high, sweetly singing over the plain. And the mountains in . . . Glooooo – ria!*" Even the kids know how to sing the Gloria.

The people in ages past found singing to be enjoyable. Singing God's praise was an important facet of the faith in ages past. The fabled "songs of Zion" were known to the Babylonians. In Psalm 137 they ask to hear them. The psalms mention not only singing to the Lord, but praising him with musical instruments and the choirs which served the Temple.

Music/ praise is spontaneous too.

- ◆ A young man, having encountered Jesus and been healed by him, suddenly stood up, gathered up his stretcher, and went home "glorifying God" the whole way (Lk 5:25).
- ◆ A blind man having received sight decided to follow Jesus and he glorified God and inspired the people to praise God (Lk 18:43)
- ◆ A leper, only one out of ten, seeing that he had been healed, turned back to Jesus, and at his feet praised God (Lk 17:15)
- ◆ You've noticed that I didn't even mention Zecharias' song of praise when he became a father (Lk 1:67), or Mary's song of praise (Lk 1:46), or the multitude of the angels singing over Bethlehem (Lk 2:14). There's no shortage of singing in Luke.

"Singing belongs to one who loves"

Actually, St. Augustine did say "*cantare amantis est*," "singing belongs to one who loves." Quoting Augustine here runs the risk of sounding corny; I hope you don't expect me to break into song as I were in a Rogers and Hammerstein musical play.

You know how it works; the guy meets the girl, he's *twitter pated* and bursts into song.

People sing in church because they love God: they sing with gusto because here before God's altar, whether you have a good voice or not, your songs are received. A few people have been moved to song by great natural beauty—you can name the patriotic songs. But here people sing because they love God, because he is a vital part of their lives, or because they have encountered the creator of heaven and earth in the Word and Sacraments.

You know, St. Augustine may be on to something. If "singing belongs to the one who loves" then why shouldn't heaven resound with the sound of angels praising God in the highest strains? For not only is "*love from God,*" but John says "*God [himself] is love.*" "*He so loved the world that he gave it his Son,*" born in Bethlehem, born in poverty, born for you.

Yes Jesus' birth inspires song; not only for his mother and the select saints we read about in the Bible. He inspires us to sing. He is born to put in a song in our hearts. Whether you think your voice is good or not, it makes little difference. God wants to hear from you.

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