

A New Song
Isaiah 42:10-16
July 10, 2005

How many of us have ever been in a foreign country where we didn't know the native language – or perhaps we thought we knew enough to get by, but once we were there, we found out we were wrong! Or perhaps we've found ourselves lost in a place we'd never been before, wandering the streets looking for some familiar landmark, desperate to find our way back home.

That's the kind of place the people of Israel were in when the prophet Isaiah spoke to them these words of hope. They had been taken from their homeland and deported to Babylon, a place where they didn't know the language, a place that was not familiar, a place where they did not want to be. They were frightened, not knowing if they would ever make it home again. They were grieving, missing their homes and families and friends. They were angry and upset, not fully understanding what was happening to them and wondering where God was.

One of the songs they sang had these words, "How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" In this distant country, they didn't feel God's comforting presence with them as they had at home. The songs of joy and praise they had sung before simply didn't fit anymore. "How can we sing the Lord's song?"

And so Isaiah told the people, "Sing to the Lord a new song!" Yes, life has changed, things are tough, but God is still with you. God has not abandoned you. You can still sing, just find a new song. Sing from the depths of your pain and brokenness, wail out your lament and you will find your sorrow turning to joy. Sing a new song, embracing your hurt and allowing God to change it to hope. God is doing something new among you.

That's the nature of jazz, making a new song out of the old. Jazz musicians take old songs and bring them forward into something new. When musicians make jazz, they participate in an act of new creation. They build new melodies with the basic materials of harmony, rhythm, and old tunes. The music is created on the spot with imagination, humor, and great freedom. The essence of jazz is improvisation, composing while performing, creating a new song.

One night Wynton Marsalis, a well known trumpeter in the jazz universe, was part of a small combo offering up a series of bebop classics. The set started off in an unremarkable way, but then Marsalis stepped to the

microphone to offer a solo called “I Don’t Stand a Ghost of a Chance With You.”

It was a melancholy ballad, full of murmurs and sighs, and Marsalis performed it with deep feeling and expression. At the climax of the song, he played the final phrase in such a way that the trumpet seemed to give actual voice to the heartfelt words “I don’t stand ... a ghost ... of ... a ... chance ...” The audience sat in awe, listening in silence.

Then it happened.

It the middle of that sacred silence, at the song’s most dramatic point, someone’s cell phone erupted in a chirping, sing-song electronic melody. In an instant, the spell was broken. People in the audience giggled nervously, turned to their drinks and resumed their table conversation.

Marsalis paused for a beat, and stood motionless. His eyebrows arched. The embarrassed cell-phone owner fled the scene, and the chatter in the club grew louder.

Marsalis didn’t move. Still frozen at the microphone, he replayed the silly cell-phone melody note for note. Then he played it again, and began improvising variations on the tune. The members of the audience stopped chatting and slowly began to listen up. He changed keys once or twice and then seamlessly eased back into a ballad tempo, and in just a few minutes, finishing his improvisation, he was exactly where he had left off: “I don’t stand ... a ghost ... of ... a ... chance ... with ... you ...”

The ovation was tremendous.¹

A new song created even in the midst of the old. That’s the way of jazz; it’s also the way of faith. When life throws us a foul ball, when we find ourselves in a foreign land incapable of speaking the language, when our well-laid plans are interrupted by the unexpected, we can find a new song to sing, a song of faith, but a new tune that expresses the sorrow and anguish of life, but which ultimately is resolved with hope and faith.

Presbyterian pastor and jazz pianist Bill Carter saw this piece of graffiti on a New York subway:

You can punch my lips so I can’t blow my horn,
but my fingers will find a piano.

You can slam the piano lid on my fingers,
but you can’t stop my toes from tapping like a drum.

You can stomp on my foot to keep my toes from tapping,
but my heart will keep swinging in four-four time.

You can even stop my heart from ticking,
but the music of the saints shall never cease.²

If we have the ears to hear and the hearts of faith, we, too, can find a new song to sing, even in the changing seasons of life. Thanks be to God.

¹ David Hajdu, “Wynton’s Blues,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, March 2003, p. 44.

² William G. Carter, “Faith in a New Key: A Conversation Between Jazz and Christian Faith,” *Presbybob Music*.

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