
Sing To The Lord A New Song? Sing It In The Key of Jazz!

A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
The Sixth Sunday of Easter – Year B

Thank you for letting me have so much fun last Sunday evening!

Actually, many of us had fun, all last weekend. The Cathedral Parish of St. Philip hosted a brilliant organ concert on Friday evening, the fruitful farmers market and beautiful weddings on Saturday, splendid Sunday morning services and sermons, and then the Spring Fling of the Cathedral Preschool on Sunday afternoon. (Lanier House Lawn looked like Six Flags Over the Cathedral, with so many children and toys around!)

But, when 5:00 rolled around last Sunday evening, you let me have fun playing the piano, for “Chill On The Hill,” our annual parking lot picnic and music festival. Yes, the real headliner was the excellent cover band, *Cover to Cover*, but most of you were there early enough to hear the opening act, which was me, playing the piano.

And I played, and sang, some of the great old hits of 1960s and 1970s. You joined me in those memories, and you let me sing. Thank you! You chilled and I sang.

But, I have a confession to make. As I sang, I was disobeying one of the most repeated commandments in the Bible.

Yes, there are all sorts of bible commandments that are not followed in our time. But there is one commandment, one in particular, that we hear a lot, and that we hardly ever follow. It is repeated often in the Psalms. And it the opening verse of the psalm we read today: *Sing to the Lord a new song!*

Sing to the Lord a new song? I did not sing any new songs on last Sunday night! (They were all over 40 years old!) Most of us had plenty of fun just singing the old songs. Sing to the Lord a new song? The old ones are just fine!

And, of course, we behave the same way in church. We far prefer the old songs. It is hard to learn a new song. The familiar hymns edify us, we say. They are our heartfelt prayers, striking chords of memory, notes of faith, melodies of love. Familiar songs, and favorite hymns, do increase our faith!

Nevertheless, the psalms repeat a different chorus. “Sing to the Lord a new song,” the psalms say, and they say that line over and over again, like a repeating chorus.

The Christian Church talks a lot about things being made new. But, those are scary words! I’ve been around the Church a long time, and let me remind you of something: in the Church we generally do not like new things! Why, it’s the new things that are so often the battlegrounds for church political life!

It’d be fine if the Church stuck with replacing only those things which we want replaced. There’s always something we want made new. We want new acolyte robes, or new paint in the parish hall. We want the preacher to preach about something new. Sometimes we just want a new priest entirely. But a new sanctuary? Of course not! A new prayer book? No way. Sing to the Lord a new song? No, No, the old ones suit us just fine.

Most of us, I daresay every single one of us, whether we are liberal or conservative, whether we are rural or urban, whether we large church or small church, have some special image of what church and religion means to us. We definitely do **NOT** want that to change. That image is what we inwardly long for when we show up

Sunday after Sunday for the liturgy. That image may be what we think we had some time long ago. And it's that image that often prevents us from experiencing God.

A friend of mine once put it well. "Do you want to know what prevents you from experiencing God the most?" he asked. "The biggest obstacle in the way of your experiencing God is whatever your last experience of God was." Your last experience, whatever it was, was so wonderful and refreshing and renewing, that you will inevitably believe that every future experience will have to be exactly like that. And it won't be.

Fred Craddock, the great Disciples of Christ preacher, tells the story of seeing a beautiful and quaint little church in the Tennessee countryside, many years ago. He was intrigued by it, because it was so pretty and yet the parishioners didn't much allow anything new. They didn't want to start a soup kitchen day for the poor. They wouldn't let black folks share the communion table with them. They didn't much like any visitors who weren't just like them. They were not into making all things new.

Years later, Craddock returned, curious to see how that beautiful and quaint little church was doing. Lo and behold, he declared, God had made things new in that place! When Craddock went inside, he saw all sorts of people, black and white, young and old, all sitting at the lunch counter eating soup. God had changed that place after all, but it was no longer a worshipping community. The old congregation was gone, and the building had been turned into a restaurant! Finally, Craddock rejoiced, different people were being allowed to eat there. If God wants things to be made new, they will be made new.

This kind of God makes us tremble. Sing to the Lord a new song. How can we sing a new song without losing our identity, without losing our heritage?

Well, there is another commandment. And, often, this other commandment appears in the same passages where the commandment to sing a new song appears. This other commandment is the commandment to "remember."

"God remembers," says this very psalm, Psalm 98, verse 4. "God remembers mercy and faithfulness."

Being open to the new, is indeed a feature of healthy spiritual life. But, just as important, is the practice of remembering. Remember.

Remembering is the practice taught us by our Hebrew ancestors who remember each year why the Night of the Passover and the wild flight from Egypt is so different from other nights. The incredible and mysterious tension of the Hebrew prophets is that they did two different things simultaneously. They declared that God was doing a new thing just as they also called the people to remember the past. It is a tension that we Christians continue during our Eucharist when we remember God's saving acts in history, when we do things in remembrance of Jesus, yet we also hope for unity and proclaim the future kingdom of heaven.

We remember familiar songs, and we believe in them! But we also sing new songs, and we believe in them, too!

Do you know what I was really playing at the piano last Sunday night? If you were listening closely, you might have noticed. I was playing jazz. Jazz. The quintessential American music is jazz. What jazz does, over and over again, is: Play the old songs in a new way. Jazz plays the old songs in a new way.

That is what I was trying to do last Sunday night! Remembering the structures and melodies and chords, but also improvising and swinging, blending notes in new ways, creating a new song from the old song.

And this is the practice I pray for in every healthy church. It is the practice I pray for here at the Cathedral, in our church life, our parish life, our mission life, our prayer life.

I am glad that this is what we do every day and every year at the Cathedral! Obey the old commandments, but in a new way. Pray the old prayers, but in a new way. Use good, old-fashioned love, but love in a new way.

Provide low-income housing, like The Cathedral Towers, but do so in a new way! Give generously to others, like the "Cathedral Antiques Show" did, but in a new way, with an event called "Cathedral Giving By Design." Study the scriptures, but use a new translation every now and then. Join a different group, every now and then, to study the same beautiful stories. Pray with the old shapes of prayer, but also be open to new shapes of prayer, maybe be open even to the new shape of a new chapel!

Love the people you live with, with the same good old love, but love them in a new way. Sing the songs you are

familiar with, remember the grand things God has done, but sing them in a new way. Jazz them up! Sing to the Lord a new song!

We are an American cathedral here. Like the medieval cathedrals of old, we strive to be a center of the community, a center for prayer, but also a center for commerce at the Saturday farmers market. We strive to be a medieval cathedral without the medieval theology! We play Cathedral music in the classical key, and we play in the key of jazz, singing the old songs with new structures of love and grace.

Sing to the Lord a *new* song, but sing with the refreshing old melodies of grace, with the familiar chords of truth, and with the same spirit of love that has always inspired and identified us.

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

© *The Cathedral of St. Philip. All rights reserved.*