

Faith, Improvisation, and The Art of Living

Isaiah 42:10-12, Ephesians 5:18-20

February 27, 2022 Mardi Gras Jazz Sunday

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Sing to God a brand-new song, sing God's praises all over the world!

Let the sea and its fish give a round of applause,

with all the far-flung islands joining in.

Let the desert and its camps raise a tune, calling the nomads to join in.

Let the villagers round up a choir and perform from the tops of the mountains.

Make God's glory resound, echoing praises from coast to coast.

Isaiah 42:10-12 The Message

Do not get drunk with wine,... but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to God in your hearts, giving thanks to the Holy One at all times and for everything in the name of Christ.

Ephesians 5:18-20 NRSV

Jazz in a worship service. A Christian, Presbyterian worship service. Are you surprised or thinking, of course?! I am a pastor who loves music and who has felt God's presence in the midst life's joys and sorrows through a wide range of music. We experience that music can take us to places and touch our souls in ways words alone cannot. So I will try my best not to get in the way of the music this morning.

Many of you here know so much about jazz – how to play it, how to teach others to play it, how to listen to other musicians. I am grateful for your knowledge and skill. I have much to learn about history of jazz, its place in American history and church worship through the years, and styles of jazz.

What I do know is that when I hear the band play and when we sing, there is a melody, often an older spiritual, and the band plays it with new arrangements and they play off each other, this call and response. An old song made new today in this time and place.

How does the Divine, Holy Mystery, God we know by many names, call us to life, to deeper life? First, we can listen for a melody from the Holy One. We are loved. We are created in God's image. God shows us who we are to be and how we are to live as we follow the ways of Jesus. We have a purpose. This gives us our basic melody.

It seems to me that following the ways of Jesus has a lot in common with playing jazz. We too are improvising on old songs in a manner of speaking. We can take the stories, the poems and teachings from biblical texts through the Hebrew Scriptures and Greek New Testament. And hear the melody of love, justice, and compassion – then live life as an improvisation on these teachings.

The task in every generation is to take those values across the bridge of time and apply them in our time and circumstances. I like the way Bill Carter explains it; he says: Each of us is, in a sense, composing our own life-song and story as we go—building on a foundation of inherited values, adding the particularities of our own life and offering the life we live to God. (1)

Like jazz, Christian living is an informed risk, an act of faith. Sometimes people don't want to learn a new song. When it comes to music and spirituality a lot of people want something predictable and orderly and nailed down. They prefer God as a classical pianist who plays only the notes that are written down somewhere. Nothing improvised! God follows the script.

And yet, the Bible is itself a record of people of faith reimagining in every generation how to live out the values of compassion and justice. In the Biblical record, the people's perception of who God is, and what our calling is moves people to go to a new place. These are metaphors for being called to follow God to new patterns for living.

The phrase in our passage from the prophet Isaiah is actually found in many places in the Bible. "Sing to the Lord a new song." Each time it appears, the people of God are being summoned to claim a new tune. In the midst of joyful times. And in the midst of hard, challenging times of grief and loss.

The Biblical characters didn't always get it right; sometimes they got it wrong and had to start again. I'm told jazz musicians sometimes get it wrong too. One musician friend told me, "In rehearsal we get lost in the music all the time! I'll suddenly realize, 'Oh man, I've lost count of where we are!' And then I'll look around and realize everyone is lost! So one of us will lightly tap our head, which means 'Right now—we're all returning to the head of the count—that is, the beginning of the count—so we'll get back in sync.'"

No matter how good the training in music theory, musicians take enormous risks when they improvise. And so do we. We make mistakes. That's the Gospel of Grace. So although authentic living is always an informed risk, there is remarkable freedom in the net of grace.

Isaiah is calling people to sing a new song to God all over creation and with all the creatures – in the sea, on the mountains, in the desert. But the danger in singing a new song is that we will sing it too soon, that we will sing it as a way to neglect the pain and injustice of the world. A great many destructive forces are at work in our lives, and the world. We see acts of horrible hate and violence. We see wars destroying countries and innocent children becoming orphans. We see the climate crisis unfolding. We see how greed means people cannot find places to live and have jobs to have enough income. We dare not sing happy songs too soon; the anguish of our world must be taken seriously. Singing too quickly is a great danger. (2)

The greater danger, however, is forgetting to sing. The more serious danger is becoming so caught up in our pain that we neglect the music we were created to make, that we become so

burdened by the world's injustice that we forget to praise our Creator. And jazz invites us to be open to singing a new song and improvising to make music together in the face of realities.

With jazz, there's no telling what might happen. Jazz musicians don't care about capturing music as black dots on a printed page. No, they want to turn the music loose, set the notes free, and then see what happens. Jazz is inherently incomplete and a little bit messy.

Michael Kater, a historian at a Canadian university, has written about the political change in Germany in the early 1930's. It was reflected, he said, in the change of music. In the Roaring Twenties, Germany loved jazz. The toe-tapping music set spirits free from the deep poverty following the First World War. Then Hitler came to power. He insisted on repetitive, simple, uniform marches that kept everybody in step. The Third Reich banned jazz from the country's popular music. It was too spontaneous, too unpredictable, too free. (3)

I have begun to wonder: what if God is a jazz musician, at least some of the time? What if She is able to invent new melodies out of the same, old notes? What if He is able to make new sounds out of tired harmonies? What if They can create new possibilities out of static situations? New hopes out of broken dreams? New freedoms out of a dead-end world?

What if God really and truly is a Creator with the power to make all things new? Then human life is filled with holy possibilities. That's the music of God, my friends, a new song beyond all we could ever dream or hope. Maybe we only hear it in bits and pieces. Yet when we hear this music, it sets us free.

Sometimes you can see it in daily deeds of kindness, in the ordinary person who protects the weak, feeds the hungry, or embraces the stranger. These good deeds are never complete or finished. There's always more work to do than we can ever accomplish. But we do what we can. And God willing, our work is joined to God's work.

In *Finding the Groove: Composing a Jazz-Shaped Faith*, Robert Gelinas writes – (4)

'A jazz-shaped faith ... balances freedom with boundaries, the individual with the group, and traditions with the pursuit of what might be. I have discovered in jazz a way of thinking, living, communicating---a way of being ... a groove.'

Syncopation. Call-and-response. Creativity. Listening. Freedom within constraints. Gelinas harnesses powerful jazz metaphors to cast a vision for a Christian faith fully alive, embracing creative tension while playing in concert with others.

Improvisation. Our lives progress not by playing predetermined notes, but by improvising in the company of others. Improvisation is not just about spontaneous originality, because good

improvisers draw on rich traditions and practice. Improvisation is an apt description of our spiritual practices, and church is our rehearsal studio.

Playing the blues. All jazz is blues. That is, pain and suffering are the native soil of jazz. Jazz is more than music, roots in suffering and longing. A jazz-shaped faith, is a blues-shaped faith. Today we may feel joy and hope alongside our lament. We gather as a congregation and community here in this place and online to hold those together.

Ensemble. You can't play jazz alone. We need community. We need connections. Both require practicing and playing in ensemble, which means listening to others, needing others, becoming who we are because of others. That is what we hear in our passage from Ephesians – that early Christian community – learn, pray, worship and sing together - *sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to God in your hearts.*

Jazz music empowers. It breaks through isolation, leads to reflection, and encourages a spirit of community. As we begin our journey through the season of Lent on the way to the resurrection, may we remember to listen for and sing a new song of hope. Amen.

1) <https://spiritofpeacesf.org/a-conversation-between-jazz-and-the-gospel/>

2) Bill Carter, *Jazz in the Pulpit: Biblical Reflections on the Syncopated Art* Ebook
<https://presbybop.com/product/581985> Page 6

3) pages 9-10

4) Robert Gelinas, *Finding the Groove: Composing A Jazz-Shaped Faith*
(Zondervan; 2009)