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***Singing Back to Life***

Lynne Clements

What is it about singing that seems to call us back to life? I love listening to music and find it to be in turn comforting, exhilarating, meditative and energizing. But listening to music is what I do when I can’t sing. It could be that I am running and the music pulses into my feet as I concentrate on not falling or it could be that I am working in a quiet coffee shop where my neighbors are not interested in hearing my rendition of Imagine Dragons “Whatever It Takes” or something from The Greatest Showman or any Michael Bublè tune. Or it may be that I am simply unable to put voice and words to what I am feeling and the music fills that inner silence.

There have been times in my life when I was not able to sing – when my heart was either so full that the song couldn’t get through the narrowness in my throat or when I was so empty that words wouldn’t come. Maybe an errant hum would escape my lips or I might croak out a phrase or two, but the full-throated, open-mouthed, freely flowing singing was absent.

Events in our lives have a way of taking our song from us. Grief, loss, disappointment, betrayal, insecurity all can steal our song. Very often, after experiencing a trauma, people cannot speak – all words seem inadequate in the face of the enormity. Maya Angelou, author, teacher, poet, writes of her early life in the autobiographical work *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. When Angelou was 8, her mother’s boyfriend raped Angelou. The man was arrested, convicted and released; but soon after, he was found beaten to death. Believing she had caused the killing because she had told of the rape, Angelou refused to speak for several years.

Holding our words and silencing our voices can feel like a protective act – as if in not communicating or holding words back helps hold back the pain. And if we can’t talk, we likely aren’t singing either.

Those deep losses and wounds have a way of taking our song. And so when our song is gone or silenced by life’s hardships, our living a mere shadow, an existence of rooted in scarcity, we feel empty and barren.

During that time of quiet, when the words weren’t spoken, Maya Angelou memorized poetry. Shakespeare, Edgar Alan Poe, and Paul Laurence Dunbar – scores of poems – so that when her silence ended, those words helped her sing her song. Those poems – songs without music – called her back into life.

I expect that those of us gathered here have known something of wordless silence. Maybe while sitting with a dear friend who has lost a spouse or parent or child. Maybe while being present with our own families or loved ones in the midst of a crisis or grief. Maybe you have poured yourself out in pursuit of justice or systemic change. Maybe you are spent from extended caregiving. In each of these circumstances, if there is any singing at all, those likely laments are sung brokenly and haltingly through tears.

My own grieving has taught me something of the emptiness caused by loss. I have with deliberation sought out and found pieces that expressed what I was feeling, content to let others sing those words on my behalf. Most of the time, I was simply silent. Then, three weeks ago, as the choir sang from John Rutter’s *Requiem*, I felt something stirring inside me, I watched the faces of our choir members as they sang and I watched Megan as she led them. They were alive in the song! Those songs of prayerful blessing, of lament and loss and of celebration awakened something that had been lying dormant within me – it was my voice and it was my song. As tears coursed down my face, I could feel myself coming back from someplace dark and quiet. And I understood this:

Songs bring us back to life.

But our story this morning begins in silence. The silence of endless waiting, the hush of countless disappointments, the haunting whisper of a space left unfilled and empty.

Welcome to Hannah’s world.

Hannah has no greater wish and hope and dream than to have a child – a dream that eludes her for years. As a result, she is identified as barren – an awful word. In her cultural world and in the world of women of her time, she is nothing – a womb-scape of lifelessness. She has so worn herself out with asking that when we enter her story, she has stopped eating and the hollowness of death seems to have settled about her. Her husband, worried about her, coaxes her with good food and loving questions, but Hannah, empty of purpose and worth, can find no words to respond.

It is as if life has stolen her song.

On the family’s annual pilgrimage to Shiloh, Hannah enters the holy space where there is no one to intercede on her behalf, nor offer a sacrifice. Deeply distressed, she does what people desperate always do – she prays or at least tries, but Hannah has no voice with which even to pray. Like so many who are marginalized, she’s all but invisible and her voice is inaudible. In that place of worship, pleading with Yaweh, she cannot even form words. We can imagine her huddled in a dark corner, with her lips moving in silent crying. With nothing else to lose, Hannah pours out her soul to God in wordless despair. Hannah has herself what we call in the south an ugly cry. And her praying is so dramatic that she catches the priest’s attention who immediately assumes she is drunk. But when Hannah reveals her troubled soul, the priest offers her peace from the God of Israel who has heard her cry.

In that moment, Hannah feels something new stirring in her

* a hopeful expectancy growing where previously she had only felt lifelessness
* a fullness where she had only knows emptiness.
* In the space where grief had lived and muffled her joy, a new reality emerges.

She will not only be the bearer of a long-awaited child, she will also be the bearer of good news –

A good news about God’s life-giving power in the midst of death, of God’s gift of possibility in the presence of hopelessness.

It is as if she has been given a new life and with it comes her voice ----

And Hannah sings.

Hannah sings a doxology to the Holy One of Israel, the rock of salvation.

“There is none like you!”

She celebrates the God who alone is worthy of trust and who comes to the aid of those in need, the God who had heard her distressed cry and who "raises the poor from the dust and the needy from the ash heap" to "inherit a seat of honor,” the God who has power to transform barren places, who calls on the least and unworthy to carry God’s good news, who gives life and evens reverses death. It is song of praise sung by one who has experienced God’s unexpected, inexplicable power. She proclaims through her song what the grieving and the lost and despairing know – God hears and God responds. It is a powerful anthem because it flows out of a voice restored to life.

Does this song remind you of another song, one sung by another woman proclaiming the wonder of God’s transformative power? Another song of the world being turned upside down?

Hannah’s song, like Mary’s Magnificat, becomes a source of deep and dangerous hope in God’s personal, powerful word, when the prospect of human ability and control have been exhausted, when people can no longer believe the promises of their rulers, when the gifts of well-being and fullness are no longer offered or given or provided for all of God’s people, when justice seems absent and when tyranny rules, when our hearts are weary and our souls spent, these songs bring us back to life. These are the songs that give us an alternate tune to the disharmonious mash the world shouts. These are the songs to which the faithful and the hopeful and the tired and the empty and the lifeless cling. These are the songs that remind us that in God what begins in barrenness ends in resurrection. It doesn’t matter how the power of death is experienced – in hopelessness or despair or oppression – Hannah flings her song boldly in the face of that power and she sings it with an in-your-face daring hope, a hope that is rooted in her own carrying the gift of life, and a prophetic witness that draws strength and power from a life that it yet to come.

When life has stolen our song, we would do well to listen to Hannah’s song. When we wonder in the midst of our silent despair if anyone can hear, we would do well to remember Hannah’s song. When we feel hopeless and powerless and lifeless, we would do well to remember Hannah’s song. In her song, we hear the promise of new life, of restoration, of reversal and of resurrection.