

## **"On Singing God" by Ellen Oak**

### **Sermon Preached at Marquand Chapel, Yale Divinity School, New Haven CT**

The readings proclaimed at the liturgy were Isaiah 12: 1-6 and John 4: 1-40. Full texts of the readings follow the sermon.

My brothers and sisters, we are called to sing God. Not just to sing about God, or sing to God, or sing for God, on God's behalf. Beyond these ways of singing, fundamentally, from the wellspring of our being, we are called to sing God. Isaiah gives voice to this calling in the hymn of thanksgiving which Dick read for us. The text tells us that one day we shall say:

The Holy One is the God of my salvation

I trust now and have no fear ,

For the Holy One is my strength, my song, and my salvation.

How can this be? How does God become our song? How do we become the song that is God? These are questions I live with from day to day as a musician, and as a person of faith. They are also questions which belong to the whole people of God, as we worship together, and as we are sent out to minister.

In order to sing God, or indeed, anything at all, we need a voice. Our voice rides on our breath, and that voiced breath is the sound of our being. It is the expressive truth of who we are. To let our voice free is to acknowledge and accept all that we are. Allowing our whole body, in every joint and sinew, to vibrate with the sound of ourselves requires both steadfastness and flexibility.

Imagine that your spine, from its base to its very tip, is the arc of a bow. If that arc is not secure at both ends, it cannot respond to the vibrating energy of sound. Not can it respond if it is held taut and rigid along its whole length. In order for your spine to sing, you must plant your feet firmly on the ground, focus your mind's attention on your body, and, with courage and patience, breathe, lift your voice, and allow yourself to be filled with sound, to actually, *become* the song. You and the song each retain your separate identities, and yet, while you sing, you and the song are one.

It's not easy. It is fairly common for voice students to feel disoriented or frightened the first few times they experience their spine, or their legs, or their torso singing. They are aware of being enlivened by something over which they feel they have no control, at least not the kind of control which they feel they have over much of their lives. Actually, they do have control. Their control consists in their assenting to become filled with song.

Life in God is not so very different from this. As people of faith, we find ourselves called by the Holy One who would be our song, the One who asks that we allow the spring of eternal life to well up within us. If we have no spiritual backbone, no secure sense of self, then there is nothing in us which can respond to this call. And if we hold on so tightly to our ideas about who we are, and what is and is not possible and appropriate for us to do and feel and be, that we will not allow any movement at all in our spiritual backbone, then, too, there is no possibility for response to God's call.

In the Gospel reading we are given the story of someone who *did* respond to God's call, pursuing her relationship with God even when it necessitated abandoning convictions and attitudes which had been part of her inherited tradition for generations. The Samaritan woman is startled that Jesus, a Jew and a man, would speak to her at all. The very existence of conversation between them breaks open the patterns of interaction laid out for them by their societies. Jesus first asks the woman for water and then implies that *he* can get water for *her* even though he has no bucket and the well is deep. She wonders if he is a greater man than her ancestor, Jacob, to be able to do this. Then Jesus starts talking about some strange kind of water which will become a spring inside her, so that she will never have to draw water from the well again. Concepts which she has used since childhood, such as "water," "well," and "being thirsty," lose the meaning they once had for her. Still, she goes on asking questions, probing. The conversation moves on to her five husbands, to the nature of worship, and to the coming of the Messiah. Her imagination must be reeling by this time, but she does not dismiss the whole exchange as an absurd dialogue with a crazy person. Rather, she goes back to town and invites her friends and neighbors to come talk with the man who has "told her everything she ever did." Somehow, in her encounter with God in Christ, she has found new life which she wants to share with others. She trusts in this life, although her previously held world view has been radically challenged on several fronts. Why does she trust? Because this person, Jesus, has told her everything she has ever done. In bringing the totality of who she has been and is to light, he has opened up the door for her to new dimensions of the present and new hope for the future. He has brought her salvation.

Most of us do not have such a singular and dramatic experience of encounter with the living God. Most of us find ourselves busy, preoccupied, intent on our own agenda, and often beset by frustration, distraction, and isolation. How can we begin to make contact with the singer that each of us is, so that God can become our song? The voice we long for is not something we can create *ex nihilo* by sheer strength of will. What we are searching for is access to the spring inside us, the spring which wells up to eternal life. The process is one of discovery, liberation, integration.

Imagine this situation which Simone Weil describes: two prisoners whose cells adjoin communicate with each other by knocking on the wall. The wall is the thing that separates them but it is also their means of communication. So it is with us and God: every separation is a link.

Perhaps we can consider the possibility that situations or aspects of ourselves which we have in the past thought of as creating distance between us and God might really be links, bridges, between us and God and one another. For instance, we might feel ourselves to be imprisoned by our bodies; or we might feel that the very experiencing of certain emotions, such as anger or lust, separates us from God. But might it not be true that our bodies, in fact, make possible our relationships to one another and to God? After all, it is only in them and through them that we experience ourselves and all of reality as we know it. And if, in a safe context, we explored our passionate and destructive urges, instead of repressing them, might we not find ourselves more able to enter into relationship with God and one another, and so to experience the fullness of life?

Tap on the walls of your prison. Breathe, and be attentive to those places in your body which respond to the breath and also to those which do not. Breathe, and look at those parts of your life which are bathed in light, and also at those parts sunk in deep shadow. Breathe, give voice to your breath, and be attentive to what your voice expresses, and also to what it hides. Every separation is a link.

In eastern orthodox churches, the human voice is the only instrument used in the liturgy. The reason for this is that all other instruments are made of inanimate materials, and it is considered fitting that only living instruments make the music of the living God. When we come together for worship we are, by God's grace, made into the visible, palpable, audible Christ, given in love for the life of the world. we are God's body now. And so, when we lift our voices together in sacred song, what we hear is the sound of God.

Readings proclaimed at the liturgy:

**Isaiah 12: 1-6**

You will say in that day: I will give thanks to you, O Lord, for though you were angry with me, your anger turned away, and you comforted me.

Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation.

With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted.

Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth.

Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

**John 4: 1-40**

Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard, "Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than John" —although it was not Jesus himself but his disciples who baptized—he left Judea and started back to Galilee. But he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." The woman said to him, "Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?" Jesus said to her, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." The woman said to him, "Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water."

Jesus said to her, "Go, call your husband, and come back." The woman answered him, "I have no husband." Jesus said to her, "You are right in saying, 'I have no husband'; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!" The woman said to him, "Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem." Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming" (who is called Christ). "When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us." Jesus said to her, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?" Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, "Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" They left the city and were on their way to him.

Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, "Rabbi, eat something." But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you do not know about." So the disciples said to one another, "Surely no one has brought him something to eat?" Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, 'Four months more, then comes the harvest'? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, 'One sows and another reaps.' I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor."

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, "He told me everything I have ever done." So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world."