

“How Can I Keep From Singing?”

That’s the song we will hear in just a few minutes.

An anthem of the indefatigable grace of God.

How can I keep from singing?

I can name a hundred reasons, for myself.
and you can name your own reasons too...

Fear,
loss,
sadness;
a wretched and aching loneliness
in the midst of it all.

Those all seem like good reasons to keep from singing.

I don’t know why,

but singing seems like it should be done way up high,
in the happy places,
in the places of light.

Singing songs of rejoicing

and of thanksgiving
and of the awesome power of God.

Those are the songs I think I’m supposed to sing.

I don't know why I would think that.

Some of my earliest memories,
as I moved out of childhood
and into angst-ridden teenage years,
some of those earliest memories
are of playing music too loud;
music that my parents hated,
or at least didn't understand.
Music that somehow told my story.

Music does that.
It tells our story.

When we sing it loud,
music prays for us,
to the God we don't always believe in.

Music will do that,
pray for us,
even when we can't sing it at all.

Before I moved to LaGrange,
I worked in Northern Virginia.
The little town I worked in
had preserved an old building from the early 20th century,
and every year,
on the week before Easter,
this building would host a Sacred Harp singing.

For those of you who don't know,
the Sacred Harp is a song book
of early American,
mostly Appalachian sacred music.

There are four parts
and those who know how,
divide themselves into perfect harmony.

But the most important part of the music
is that you just show up and sing.
You sing loud.

You sing loud
even if you are a terrible singer.
You sing loud
even if you don't know how to sing.

I walked in
and I heard the sound of my childhood.
Country churches with my dad's family,
the old cemetery always across the road.
I remembered my Aunt June Bug
handing us sticks of Juicy Fruit
pulled from her enormous, 30 pound purse.
I remembered laying my head in my momma's lap,
as the pews resonated with the sound of that singing.
A sound high,
lonesome,
and aching after God.

I walked into that building in Virginia,
lost and alone.

I wasn't too happy in my job;
other parts of my life were falling apart too.

I walked in
and I heard that sound.
High,
lonesome,
aching.
The sound my own heart was making.

And I knew that I was not alone.
There,
in a room full of people I had never met,
singing the sound of my earliest memories of God.
The sound of a God not far off,
a God nearby to every human longing,
nearby to every broken heart.

How could I keep from singing?
I opened the book to every song they called.
And I sang as loud as I knew how.
I sang till I couldn't recognize the sound of my own voice.

After a while they called out another song,
and then invited any first time folks to come and stand in the square,
surrounded by the four parts.

I had sung loud,
but nothing could prepare me for that sound.
Standing in the middle
with all the voices of God
raised up to the God they loved,
raised up to sing a song
with words
and notes
and meter
and harmony.
But it was more than all those things.
It was,
for a time,
the sound of surrender,
of trusting that God is more
than all the things we've ever said he is,
of trusting that God loves the unloveable,
and redeems the irredeemable.

And it's true you know...
(if Jesus is to be believed)
with all those stories
about lost coins
and lost sheep.
about the last workers getting the same payday.
about the lost son, greeted with an embrace,
before repentance is even on his tongue.

How can I keep from singing?
if that's the God I serve?

How can I keep from singing?
if the same love that moved in the beginning,
is still active...
...and on till kingdom come.

How can I keep from singing?
When love is Lord of Heaven and Earth?
How can I keep from singing?

And if love is Lord,
if we really find a way to believe that,
or at least to live as if we did,
then what would become possible?

Would it be possible to believe
even the things that we can't make sense of?
Would it be possible to believe
that God doesn't bring the tragedy;
God doesn't bring the loss;
that God is never the cause of our grief?

God doesn't bring the death;
God always brings the resurrection.

That has always been God's purpose,
to create,
to re-create.
To take chaos and order it.
To give life;
to give new life.

To find and redeem everything
that has ever got itself lost.

In the darkest places,
in the hopeless places.
In the deserts and the valleys.
Since the beginning of time
 all the way to the end of the world.

And since I want to believe that all of that is true,
 that Love is Lord of Heaven and earth,
 how can I keep from singing?