The great jazz musician and composer Dave Brubeck died last December 5, one day short of his 92\textsuperscript{nd} birthday. Brubeck is best known for his time-bending compositions like Take Five and Time Out. He is less well known for his sacred music, even though his compositions in that area are numerous.

Brubeck’s classic sacred music piece is a Mass commissioned by Ed Murray, editor of a Roman Catholic magazine. Murray wanted a mass that reflected the American experience -- and what better music to use than jazz? When Brubeck protested that he didn't know anything about the mass, Murray wasn't deterred. “Dave,” he said, “I want people to be happy. I’m tired of people coming up for Communion with sad looks on their faces when it should be the happiest day of their week. So will you make it rhythmic and kind of feeling of something to make people move up the aisle, maybe swinging a little? I want a fresh view.”

This is just a tiny piece of what Brubeck came up with:

\textit{(A short selection from the Alleluia of Brubeck’s Mass is played.)}

It was a new song. Old, old words set to a new rhythm and given new life.
“O sing to the Lord a new song,” commands Psalm 96, “sing to the Lord, all the earth!” But this psalm was written in the time of Babylonian Exile in the 6th century BC. Jerusalem was in ruins; Israel existed only as a shell of what it once was.

Sing to the Lord, bless his name;
tell of his salvation from day to day?
Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvelous works among all the peoples?

How odd those words must have sounded to the people who heard them for the first time.

Ascribe to the Lord, O families of the peoples,
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name;
bring an offering, and come into his courts.

How could anyone claim that God was in charge when there was, in fact, no Temple to which to bring an offering, no courts to enter…at all?

“How sing among the nations, ‘The Lord is King!’” But where was Israel’s king? Having a king meant being protected. Israel finally got a king when Samuel anointed Saul. Israel had great and powerful kings under David and Solomon. The kings that followed them were a mixed bag…but they were on the throne,
nonetheless. Now in the Exile, there was no king at all. Who would protect them? Who would administer justice? How would they maintain their identity without a ruler in this strange land?

Israel needed a new song. A new song that would help them understand and celebrate who they were in this new situation.

So what’s new about this psalm? It sounds much like many other psalms, extolling God’s greatness and power. The content of the psalm doesn’t seem new at all.

Worship the Lord in holy splendor; tremble before him, all the earth.
Say among the nations, “The Lord is king!
The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved.
He will judge the peoples with equity.”
He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with his truth.

What’s new is not the content of the psalm, but the perspective of the speaker. No longer is God Israel’s alone, now God is king and judge of all the nations. This is not the deliverer of Israel, the establisher of Zion…this is the God of all people, Lord of every soul who has gazed up at the stars with awe and wonder. Even those who worship idols, who are seen as enemies, are invited into the sanctuary to offer praise and tribute to the God who made heaven and earth.
This psalm invites the faithful Israelites to see from a new perspective, to step back from their own location far enough that they gain a new vision, just as we did in the 20th century when we first saw that photo of our beautiful blue planet hanging in space. Once they can see from a distance, they are able to recognize that they don’t have sole claim to a relationship with Yahweh. This God is God not just for some but for all. This new vision of God means that the people of God must also think in new ways about themselves.

And because this is holy scripture for us now as much as it was for God’s people 2500 years ago, it asks the same thing of us:

O sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth.

In the end, the plea for new songs is a plea for a new church, a church with a new perspective, a renewed vision of God, world, and self.

Many of you know that the 4-day Annual Conference of United Methodists in West Michigan ended yesterday. Pastor Bill and I attended, as did Sara Cardinal and Barb Burke, the lay delegates from University Church. David Dekker was present as a delegate from the Lansing District.

The West Michigan Annual Conference is singing new songs and doing new things in many ways. We celebrated new collaborations with United Methodists on the
east side of the state, the Detroit Annual Conference. A larger number of pastors than before are being appointed to positions across conference lines; committees and agencies are not only cooperating, some are merging. The camping ministries from both Conferences, for example, have joined forces. Now we share a single Communications Director, our own Mark Doyal, who has a larger staff to support him.

One piece of legislation passed last week was authorization for both Conferences’ Board of Trustees to take out the loan necessary for purchasing property somewhere in the Lansing area that will become our new Michigan Area Ministry Center. The exact location hasn’t been selected yet, but the positive vote meant that the Conference supported the Trustees’ decision that we need a centrally located facility, owned by both Conferences, not just for office space but as a gathering space for groups from both Conferences to come together for creative, shared ministries.

The people of both the West Michigan and the Detroit Conferences are looking for fresh ways to do ministry; our new song is one of asking what produces vitality and fruitfulness. Our keynote speaker for yesterday’s “Inspiration Saturday” event was Lovett Weems, a pastor, author, professor, and Director of the Lewis Center for Leadership at Wesley Seminary in Washington D.C.
I’ll admit that I can be pretty cynical when it comes to church “experts” telling me how to do my job. Book shelves have been filled beyond their capacities with treatises written by church growth gurus who want us to believe that their plan is the key to success.

What I found refreshing about Lovett Weems what that he recognized that God works in surprising, unpredictable ways to bring new life to our churches. Sometimes God’s surprising ways include us and sometimes God manages to bring new life to churches despite us and the plans we make. God is continually using and incorporating old material – us -- to compose new songs for the transformation of the world. Our job is to recognize what God is up to, especially when it’s not what we expected.

Weems reminded us that the original Methodist movement of the 18th century relied heavily on lay preachers, including many women preachers. Its rapid growth on both sides of the Atlantic was due, in large part, to the work of those who were not ordained clergypersons. He also told us that John Wesley, father of the Methodist movement, was originally against the idea of anyone but an ordained clergyman preaching the word of God. In fact, Wesley was on his way to put a stop to the work of a lay preacher when – fortunately for us – he decided to visit his mother. Susanna convinced him to listen to the man first, before passing
judgment. He did, and he had to admit that man’s preaching was obviously having a positive impact. God was doing something Wesley hadn’t expected: God was using old words to write a new song.

God wrote a new song in Dave Brubeck, too. When Brubeck finished the mass that he had been commissioned to write, he proudly played it for various officials of the Roman Catholic Church. But after the premier, a priest told him he had left out the “Our Father.”

What’s the “Our Father”? Brubeck asked. That doesn’t mean anything to me; I’m not Catholic. The priest explained that it was the Lord’s Prayer, often referred to by Catholics by its first line, “Our Father, who art in Heaven….”

“Well, nobody told me to write it, so I didn’t write it,” Brubeck answered. “I’m finished with The Mass; I’m going to the Bahamas with my family and I’m going to take a vacation. I’ve been working very hard.” And he left.

And one night, while on vacation in the Bahamas, Brubeck dreamt the whole Our Father – the words, the melody, the harmony, the rhythms, everything. He jumped out of bed in the middle of the night and wrote it all down. Now it’s part of The Mass.
The dream didn’t just complete *The Mass*, it changed Dave Brubeck’s life. “I felt that somebody was trying to tell me something,” he said, “so I joined the Catholic Church. Now, people say I converted. I didn’t convert to Catholicism, because I wasn’t anything to convert from. I just joined the church.”

Brubeck wasn’t the first to bring together jazz and religion. The great jazz pianist Mary Lou Williams also composed a jazz mass. Duke Ellington wrote several sacred pieces, including “Come Sunday” which is in our hymnal. The roots of jazz come from gospel and the African-American church experience. It seems only logical that those roots would produce spiritual fruit through jazz music.

Besides jazz is a great image for the church: it’s got structure but leaves room for improvisation; constant communication is necessary to produce the desired results; and that result is never the same thing twice. Often it’s as much of a surprise to the musicians as to the audience. The whole enterprise is very collegial; it depends on trust and shared vision.

Best of all, the creativity of a jazz band, just like the creativity of a congregation, mirrors God’s creativity. Just like a jazz musician, God is constantly looking for new notes to play, not as a solo, but as part of an ensemble. When the band members, or the church members, are open to where the spirit leads them, a new song is born and a new way to give praise and thanks comes to life.
References


