



**ST. COLUMBA'S**  
**EPISCOPAL CHURCH**

## *A Song to God*

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*St. Columba's Episcopal Church*  
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*Advent 2, Year B*  
*Isaiah 40: 1-11*

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Our worship values simplicity. Some of the most sacred objects in this church are primordial. The life of these objects extends millions of years before human history even begins. Baptism, for instance, is about the human and divine history of water. The Eucharist unfolds through simple grains and fruit. On Ash Wednesday it is the dust of plants we smear on our faces. And during Easter and Advent, we light the paschal candle and the advent wreath with fire.

Each of these simple objects in the context of our worship are illuminations of the Spirit -- of what the Spirit is and who we are becoming in response to it. I'd like to add one more feature to our ancient-church objects list. Before we planted crops, before we dug wells, likely before we could articulate words, we have been a signing people.

Archeologists have recovered musical instruments at least forty thousand years old, and some evolutionary biologists think singing was a part of human life going back many more hundreds of thousands of years.

Why do we sing?

One way we try to answer unanswerable questions is to turn to the beginning. Thomas Geissmann, a Swiss anthropologist, found in his research that all five primates that sing (humans, lemurs, gibbons, Titi, and Tarsiers) all form periodic monogamous relationships. Perhaps it is the gift of song that allows us to bind ourselves so closely together. Others have suggested that singing emerged as the length of early childhood development extended and parents needed more persuasive ways to comfort and reassure their babies when they could not hold them.

Perhaps most obvious -- and certainly compatible with the first two suggestions -- researchers suggest that as human communities begin to grow they need increasingly complex ways to not only communicate with one another but to build stronger and deeper emotional bonds and this they did through the power of song.

Music has the mysterious power to communicate those things that words on their own fail to articulate. Music can bypass our

reasons, our excuses, our ham handed attempts at understanding and categorizing. Music can swirl. Can be the finger of God pressing into our chests to stir the spirit back to life.



The very first prayer book was not written in England in the 16th Century, but rather in Palestine by the Hebrews which we have inherited in the book of Psalms. The Psalms have for millennia always been sung. As so many of the texts from the Bible should be understood.

Our text this morning from Isaiah is no exception. Surely it was, in part, a move to sing that led to the passage we have before us -- to sing to God as David had done.

Imagine the Israelites. Imagine them as captives in Babylon, sitting around a fire after the end of another alienating day. Their eyes cast downward, images of their native land -- of their ruined sacred spaces -- still fresh in their memory. Had their God been defeated? Had they been abandoned? How could hope ever return and not feel naive and fanciful?

Then one of them -- whom later we'll call a prophet -- picks up the harp and begins to sing.

*Comfort, O Comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem ...*

None of this passage makes sense if these people had not been close to despair. If they had not known pervasive, seemingly unending suffering. A people that understand that *All life is like grass* are people broke of the illusion of control and power. While riding high we might convince ourselves that we are untouchable and beyond the contingencies that define everyone else. But a people who have seen their hopes rocked and overrun know that life-altering events can happen in the blink of an eye.

And yet this is not a text of despair! It is a song of hope. From the perspective of faith that *life is like grass* is just to acknowledge that every day is a gift!

Isaiah continues,

*Get you up to a high mountain, ...  
lift up your voice with strength, ...  
lift it up, do not fear [!]*

A people who can sing even when so much of their world is tragically altered and changed come to know and feel that God can show up anywhere. Not just in Jerusalem. Not just in the nave of St. Columba's. God found them in Babylon, found them in exile, and we pray that God will find us in our homes this morning.

Our moments of dislocation can be moments of preparation. When our molds of what God is and where God is to be found are broken, new highways for God emerge. In those days God promises,

*Every valley shall be lifted up,  
and every mountain and hill be made low ...  
and all people shall see it together ...*

The command to Cry out! is not orderly. Not sensible. It calls us back to our ancient roots. To a rhythm and melody that connects us to a pervasive sense of peace even when the world shakes around us. It emboldens us to live our lives fully stretched out -- not recoiled and timid. Every day is a gift. Rejoice! Every song a chance to let our spirits tenderly heal and lift and soar.



The hard, inspired work by Diane, Anne, our digital editors (Bronwyn and Suzannah), and so many of you have allowed us all to continue to sing through this pandemic. To let our stories pierce through the noise of our lives.

And as wonderful as this is, I confess that I still yearn to be able to sing together. And this might mean that I'm contradicting everything I've just said, and you know what, I'm okay with that. Because I want to say that even though I haven't met many of you, I miss you! And I want to be immersed in your songs. To be back with you in Jerusalem, our nave, and have the music saturate me from head to toe. To be lost in your voices and be healed and strengthened and known by them.

Each of our ancient objects in this place connect us deeply to the earth -- to our lives embodied and interlinked with water and fire, dust and grain. Our songs have this singular power to both birth a sense of coherence in our lives and also to resist an over-reaching tale that we've got all life "buttoned up."

*This* is our advent journey this year. To speak tenderly with one another and with ourselves. To search out and to have God find us in new places, to see again that each day is a gift, and also to be patient and true to a life quite altered and sometimes frayed. To bring all of that into song -- stretched out open and raw and ready for the new day always on the horizon. *Amen.*