

# With Joyful Song

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**W**hen the Bible wants to describe the wonder of creation, the joy of liberation, or the exaltation of union with God, it turns to song. In its lyrical description of the beginning of all things, for example, the Book of Job puts these words in God's mouth as he questions Job: "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations . . . when the morning stars sang together and all the divine beings shouted for joy?" (Job 38:4, 7). When Isaiah wants to celebrate liberation from the Babylonian Exile, he has God give this command: "Go out from Babylon . . . proclaim it with joyful song, sending out the news to the ends of the earth; tell them, 'The LORD has redeemed his servant Jacob'" (Isaiah 48:20). And when Christian writers want to describe what heaven is like, the Book of Revelation paints a picture of heavenly worship filled with singing, in which one choir joins another until all of creation is voicing God's praise. The four living creatures echo the song of the angels: "Holy, holy, holy is God the sovereign Lord of all," while the twenty-four elders praise God the Creator: "You are worthy, O Lord our God, to receive glory and honor and power, because you created all things . . ." (Revelation 4:8, 11). Together these two choirs join the angels to sing to the victorious Lamb: "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and wealth, wisdom and might, honor and glory and praise" (Rev. 5:11). Then the martyrs join the hymn: "Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom, thanksgiving and honor, power and might be to our God for ever! Amen!" (Rev. 7:11). And finally, joined by all creation, the "vast throng" of God's people sing: "Hallelujah! The Lord our God, sovereign over all, has begun to reign! Let us rejoice and shout for joy and pay our homage to God, for the wedding feast of the Lamb has begun!" (Rev. 19:6-7).

Why does the Bible turn to the metaphor of song to describe creation's response to the Creator or the depth of feeling among a saved people in the presence of their liberator? For two reasons: because singing is one of the oldest forms of human communication and because singing involves us (and those around us) so completely that it is the one form of human communication that may be able to survive even the ravages of Alzheimer's Disease.

What we normally think of as the development of "speech" among the earliest humans may, in fact, have had strong elements of singing—intonation, a melody line, crescendos, and rhythm. (Remember that the oldest musical instrument that we know of, besides the voice itself, is the drum.)

The act of singing involves the whole person—body, mind, and spirit—more completely than most other human activities. Further, it involves those around us. We receive sound not only with our ears but with our whole bodies. Sound waves move (vibrate) the air, and we receive those vibrations with our bodies. Our ears process that vibration as sound, and our minds recognize those sounds as song, as music. If we are open to that sound and its meaning, we respond with our spirits, minds, and voices and join the song. But whether or not we join the singing, our bodies and minds are wrapped up in the sound event, absorbing its vibrations and its meaning.

Study after study has also shown that singing is one of the gifts of communication that stay with us longest. One three-year study in Washington, DC, led by Dr. Gene D. Cohen, director of George Washington University's Center on Aging, Health, and Humanities, examined how singing affects the health of those fifty-five years old and older. The study concluded that participants in a senior singers chorale formed by the Levine School of Music had fewer doctor visits, eyesight problems, incidences of depression, less need for medication, and fewer falls and other injuries than two control groups. Drawing on such lessons, Chreanne Montgomery-Smith of the British Alzheimer's Society founded Singing for the Brain, a singing group for those with dementia, memory problems, or Alzheimer's Disease. She found that people in the group could use their memory for singing to remember other things. And Professor Clive Ballard of King's College, London, director of research at the Alzheimer's Society, notes research that the part of the brain that processes speech is different from the part that processes music. In fact, music memory and the ability to sing reside in several parts of the brain, which is what may allow this form of communication and memory to survive when even speech fails.

**A**ll of this helps to explain why singing is a key element of Christian liturgy: "Singing is one of the primary ways that the assembly of the faithful participates actively in the Liturgy. The people are encouraged 'to take part by means of acclamations, responses, psalms, antiphons, [and] hymns . . .' (*Sing to the Lord*, 26, quoting *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 30). It also explains why "the musical formation of the assembly must be a continuing concern in order to foster full, conscious, and active participation" (STL, 26). Our song, then, is not only for the liturgy but for nourishment for the week ahead and for the journey through life.