

Songs with dangerous choruses (Psalm 105:1-11; 17A)

Sometimes we can sing in perfected harmony, but there is still something disturbing about our song.

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After COVID-19, when we get ready to return to using the shared space of our sanctuaries without restrictions, one of the things we are going to miss is singing together.

I am speaking not of the singing of performers who stand in front of us while we passively listen but of the music that we sing together. There is much power in the music that compels us to join in and make our own contributions. This is one of the powers of congregational singing: the power of congregants finding a way to get their unique voice into the shared space. Think soprano, alto, tenor, and bass all finding their notes and claiming their contribution to the harmonies (and sometimes disharmonies!) of united voices.

Sometimes we can sing in perfected harmony, but there is still something that is disturbing about our song. The hymn texts themselves betray the harmonies we perform.

As a lover of hymns, I am always pressing our congregation to think of the implications of the words that we consider sacred. As a black congregation, we are aware that there are lyrics that subtly re-enforce the myth of white supremacy.

“Would you be whiter, much whiter than snow?” No, thank you.

“When darkness veils his lovely face...” In a culture that privileges whiteness, it is not the darkness that veils God’s face. Right now, we seem to be blinded by the white.

Singing these psalms about covenant, promise, and the promised land is often troubling, too. Singing is such an empowering experience that we must be careful of our lyrics and the implications they have today for those who are unmentioned, ignored, absent.

Psalm 105 speaks positively about the covenant made with Abraham and the promise to Isaac—and it connects that promise with the land of Canaan as an inheritance. In our world, the coupling of chosenness with the right to real estate is at the core of so much friction in both nations and neighborhoods. It is the source of unending wars and at the heart of gentrification. It’s too easy to sing these choruses with our eyes closed to the realities we are creating for others.

Between verses 9 and 10, there is a shift from the individual story of Abraham to the story of Jacob and Israel as a people. It is important to honor the story of the progenitor of faith. But we also have to remember that Canaan was already inhabited. There were indigenous peoples there.

We often fail to see the destruction and displacement of those who might be viewed as impediments to our own fulfillment of generational promises. And yet we sing on with our eyes closed.

Beware of the songs with the dangerous choruses, the repeated refrains that somehow declare to us that we, above all others, deserve this. They substitute our way of being as the thing God wishes for us. They render our harmonies irrelevant, no matter how complex and beautiful they may sound.