“Lift Every Voice and Sing” - Stephanie Sorge, 6.16.24

Few songs are as beautiful and soul-moving as “Lift Every Voice and Sing.” The words were written by James Weldon Johnson as a poem around the turn of the 20th century, and set to music by his brother, J. Rosamond Johnson. In 1917, the NAACP named it the Negro National Anthem, and many still refer to it as the Black National Anthem today. The song was passed from school to school, community to community, and generation to generation as a precious inheritance. I sometimes wonder if singing it in a predominately White church is another form of colonial appropriation of riches that do not belong to us. Who’s song is it to sing?

The Johnson brothers were born in the decade following the Civil War. They were first educated in their native Jacksonville, Florida, and went on to earn degrees from Atlanta University and the New England Conservatory of Music. James became an educator, lawyer, NAACP organizer, diplomatic consul, writer, editor, and publisher - a key figure in the Harlem Renaissance. J. Rosamond’s career primarily focused in show business, and he was a prolific songwriter, producer, singer, actor, and music publisher. Both attained incredible success, though they also faced many obstacles because of the color of their skin. Who’s song is it to sing?

James Weldon Johnson’s initial plan was to write a poem to commemorate the birthday of Abraham Lincoln, but he could not escape nor ignore the realities of the ongoing movement for civil rights, and the continuing struggle of many Black Americans after the Civil War, particularly in the South where Jim Crow laws ruled. He and his brother were in their 20s when they wrote this song, already well-versed in the pain, suffering, and oppression of fellow Black Americans. Who’s song is it to sing?

“Lift Every Voice and Sing” is mournful and hopeful, and over the years it has encouraged and inspired countless people in their journeys to rise beyond the strictures and oppressive structures of White supremacy. In her autobiography, Maya Angelou recounted her graduation ceremony in 1940. The whole community came together to celebrate and support the bright, young graduates of the Black school in Stamps, Arkansas. When the big day arrived, her first clue that something was amiss came when their usual assembly routine was interrupted. Typically they would sing the National Anthem, recite the Pledge of Allegiance, and then sing the Black National Anthem, but before they could launch into that song, they were asked to sit down.

Two White men walked in, one of whom proceeded to give something a stump speech as the commencement address. He shared all about the investments and improvements coming to the schools - really to the White Central High School. Angelou recounted the speech in detail, which essentially boiled down to this: “The white kids were going to have a chance to become Galileos and Madame Curies and Edisons and Gauguins, and our boys (the girls weren’t even in on it) would try to be Jesse Owenses and Joe Louises.… We were maids and farmers, handymen and washerwomen, and anything higher that we aspired to was farcical and presumptuous.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Angelou felt her confidence and courage and dreams vanish in an instant. Her academic rival, Henry Reed, who edged her out for valedictorian, took to the podium to deliver his prepared remarks: words of triumph and encouragement that fell flat in the deflated room. Finally, throwing aside hours of careful preparation poured into the speech, Henry dropped his script, turned to face the graduates, and began to sing, “Lift every voice and sing…” Soon Angelou found herself standing and singing with her graduating class. Kindergartners dressed as buttercups and daisies and bunny rabbits, prepared to perform a cute, choreographed dance, instead came on stage to join in the song, finding a new rhythm and steps. The whole audience stood and joined in. Though she had grown up singing the song, Angelou heard it “for the first time” in this kairos moment.

Angelou writes, “while echoes of the song shivered in the air… the tears that slipped down many faces were not wiped away in shame. We were on top again… We survived. The depths had been icy and dark, but now a bright sun spoke to our souls.”[[2]](#footnote-2) She continued, “Oh, Black known and unknown poets, how often have your auctioned pains sustained us? Who will compute the lonely nights made less lonely by your songs, or the empty pots made less tragic by your tales?”[[3]](#footnote-3) Who’s song is it to sing?

Juneteenth commemorates the day, many months after the end of the Civil War and the official emancipation of enslaved Americans, when news of the war’s end and effective emancipation finally made its way to Galveston, Texas, the last place to be notified. Good news does not always travel fast. Often it takes us even longer to catch up.

Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. It had already been signed, but was not yet a reality for those living in the Confederate states. When the Union prevailed, emancipation extended to those states, too, even if news had not yet reached all people. Enslaved peoples were not made free. They were created by and made in the image of a liberating God. Already free, always free, but not yet recognized as such by the powers and oppressors that be.

Already but not yet is the space in which we live. We affirm the promise of God’s re-creation, the promises of justice, peace, and flourishing for all people. We affirm that the kingdom of heaven is the realization of the beloved community, already promised and accomplished in Jesus Christ, but not yet our reality here and now.

Already but not yet is the language of our faith. It’s the kind of faith that the writer of Hebrews extols. The faith of those who died without seeing promises realized, but who had faith, who saw the promises in the distance and embraced them. As followers of Jesus Christ, we believe that the promises of God have been accomplished in Jesus Christ, but we are still awaiting their full realization.

We wait actively, pointing towards and working for those kingdom realities and values. One of the Great Ends of the Church, according to our *Book of Order*, is the exhibition of the kingdom of God to the world. We are called to live as closely into the reality of that final realm as we can. We participate in the transformation and redemption of the world, even as we are being transformed and redeemed.

God knows just how far from that reality we are. One of the biggest stumbling blocks for us in this country is White supremacy. It is our shameful history that we must not ignore or diminish. It continues to shape our present reality. The work of dismantling it is enormous, but until we do, we are stuck in the not yet of injustice. Until we see and recognize how the isms of hate and fear and division hurt us all, until the fight for justice and reconciliation belongs to each and every one of us, until we care as much about the struggle and emancipation of our neighbor and sibling as we do for ourselves, we are stuck in the not yet.

I use “we” and “us” in recognition that we are a majority White congregation in a majority White denomination. I do not want to erase those who are outside of that demographic, but I still use “we” and “us” to own the work, and as a statement that we are all in this together. We have to be.

“Lift Every Voice and Sing” invites all voices into the song. Our parts and harmonies may be different, but we sing the same words that tell the truth about where we’ve been, yet still point hopefully to what God has promised will be. For many of us, this is a song of confession, truth-telling, and recognizing our need for repentance, reconciliation, and transformation. For others it is a declaration of survival, a bright soul-lifting sun, a witness and testimony to what has been endured, and a denial of the forces that would continue to constrain body, mind, or soul. For all of us, it is a prayer, born of faith and hope, for the future God has promised and already secured in Jesus Christ, even if it is not yet realized. It is a commitment to continue on the path to which we’re called by God - a path of justice, repair, and healing. And so, with a bit of fear and trepidation, with humility and reverence, and with a prayer for courage to march on until God’s purposeful end and re-creation, I invite us all to stand, in body or spirit, to lift our voices together and sing…

1. Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, p. 174-6 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid, p. 179 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid, p. 180 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)