

A NEW SONG

The first time ever I drove down Los Osos Valley Road from the freeway, I said, aloud, “This is the most beautiful valley I have ever seen.” It was a spring morning following winter rains. The sky was a brilliant blue. The nestling hills were an intense green. The first wildflowers were beginning to emerge along the roadside. And as we came near Los Osos, great splashes of colors bathed the fields where farmers were raising flowers for seed. The sense of the glory of God’s creation was breathtaking.

Art and I, newly ordained and new to the Central Coast, had come to Los Osos to write an article for *The Mission Bell*, the diocesan newspaper. It was to be one of a series about each of three new congregations recently established by the Diocese of El Camino Real in a program created by the national Episcopal Church. The idea was for dioceses to raise new church development funds that would support newly created mission congregations on a sliding scale over five years, as they grew and by God’s grace became fully self-supporting parishes. In the words of the Psalmist, the mission was to “Sing to the Lord a new song.”

Art and I found the new St. Benedict’s, lacking its own assembly space, worshiping in the chapel of the Los Osos mortuary across the street from where we are now. That morning perhaps two dozen people celebrated the Holy Eucharist together. Afterwards there was an outdoor coffee hour. The people we met were in good spirits, welcoming and gracious. They seemed to share an esprit de corps, a common commitment to their new church community and a joy in the ministry God had given them. They were having fun! Together, they **were** singing a new song. Art and I caught their spirit, and the article we wrote reflected that.

Nearly two years later, we returned to St. Benedict’s, where I had been called as the vicar. Once again, I met the pioneers who were determined to blaze a new trail for the church. Mary Gears, Richard Lackie, Sarah Chesebro, Judy Hood Schloss, Nita Kenyon, Howard

Vollmer, Stefanie Shuman, and Fr. Bob Kincaid were among them. They expressed something new and different. These were people on a mission to make a splash in Christ's name. And they did. Singing a new song, St. Benedict's grew into a full-fledged parish in just a few years.

Once St. Benedict's had reached parish status, I felt it was time for me to move on. Over months and years, with God's help, the people of St. Benedict's called two other rectors, first Mary Elizabeth Pratt-Horsley and then Caro Hall. Both were widely admired and deeply loved. And so, with their gifts and by God's grace, the St. Benedict's community continued and developed and flourished, a chorus singing the Lord's song in new ways, attracting new members and finding new opportunities to seek and serve Christ in Los Osos and beyond.

Now St. Benedict's is at another new place. This transition period, like all transitions, may not necessarily seem like a joyful adventure. For church communities, the time between rectors is always difficult. Grief at any loss is painful. Juggling new responsibilities ordinarily assigned to a priest can be awkward. Uncertainty about the future tends to be stressful. And so the vision and mission of the people of God can be overshadowed.

Three important things to remember: First, this congregation always has had strong lay leadership grounded in faith, commitment to living out Christian love of God and neighbor, and a can-do spirit. I have seen that outlook come alive once again as we have planned this morning's worship. Second, the Diocese of El Camino Real has this congregation's back, providing wisdom of experience and moral support and spiritual guidance during the transition. And third, above all, God always is with each of us and all of us and available to us. And so as people of faith, whenever we are anxious we need to pray for the Holy Spirit's help, listen to what we hear, and act accordingly. Ours is the God of new life in Christ. Through this transition time St. Benedict's again is a chorus learning to sing a new song to the Lord.

Finally, there is one more urgent dimension of the call to sing a new song. The Book of Psalms, "the hymnal of ancient Israel," climaxes in a final series of universal hymns of praise, each beginning and ending

with a “halleluja,” meaning “Praise God.” These psalms urge the whole of creation to praise God. The psalm immediately before today’s psalm proclaims: “Praise [God] from the heavens, praise God in the heights, praise God all the angels, . . . praise God sun and moon, praise God all you shining stars, praise God you highest heavens . . . praise God from the earth . . . fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling God’s command, mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars, wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds . . . men and women alike, old and young together . . .” Brother sun and sister moon, as St. Francis put it.

In more prosaic words, let all creation praise God. For God made it, God loves it, and God keeps it, in the words of Julian of Norwich. God is the **householder of creation**, the biblical theologian John Dominic Crossan tells us. At the same time, Crossan says, we human beings are the **housekeepers** of creation. We are not simply the users of creation, the exploiters of creation. Instead, we are the species appointed by God to take care of creation. The rhinos can’t do that. The giraffes can’t do that. Even those well-meaning creatures the dogs can’t do that. Only human species can take care of God’s creation for God.

And in global terms, that is the great issue for humanity in our time: How will we keep the creation that God has given into our care? We know that humanity’s record has been mixed. Often our species has harmed the creation God gave us. We know the result: Melting icebergs. Dying species. Wildfires. Hurricanes. Earthquakes. Tornadoes. Massive pollution. The hottest summer ever. At least since publication of Rachel Carson’s book *Silent Spring* in the 1960s, scientists and the environmental movement have seen this coming. And yet the devastation of God’s creation has continued.

Once again, this time in a global sense, the community that is church needs to sing a new song to the Lord. We need to answer the call and take the initiative to sing a new song of creation. All of us. Everywhere. As always, this parish has been at the forefront of response, asking what its people and its allies may do to address climate change. Come together to study the issues. Pray for guidance. And act. Plant trees. Enrich the soil. Reduce the carbon footprint of St. Benedict’s.

Advocate for public policies to reverse the damage. Write a book. And then come together more, pray more, learn more, and act more. Let me say it once again: Sing a new song to the Lord.

Here is the new song I mean, from the first verse of Hymn 580:

“God who stretched the spangled heavens, infinite in time and place, flung the suns in burning radiance, through the fields of silent space; we, your children in your likeness, share inventive powers with you. Great Creator, still creating, show us what we yet may do.”

Sing that new song. And then **do it**. Amen.

■ The Rev. Judith Stevens