

Polly's Pondering

"But let all who take refuge in Thee rejoice, let them ever sing for joy; and defend them, that those who love Thy name may exult in Thee" Psalm 5:11

One of the hardest things about the changes in the way we worship has been the lack of singing. Music has always been one of the strongest forms of worship for me. The words are so powerful, convicting, convincing, soothing, and healing. There is a hymn I have been singing for days on days now. It was a hymn that was written in 1900. Now you might be wondering why this song, why this ancient song at that. So, let me tell you.

The hymn is entitled: *Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing*. It was written by James Weldon Johnson 1871-1938. I first came across this song in the Hymnal of the United Methodist Church. It is on page 519 of our current hymnal. For many of you the first time you heard this song was about 10 years ago in February when I introduced it in worship shortly after my appointment here. I love this song. It's rich harmonies and soulful lyrics touch depths in me that often need convicting and healing all at the same time. During these days of confusion and unrest I find I am singing in more often. I woke up with its tune on my mind this morning and the words greeted my granddaughter's sleepy presence in my room. "Lift every voice and sing, till earth and heaven ring, ring the harmonies of liberty...". Together we filled her cereal bowl and pushed her chair in as the words continued to roll off my lips "let our rejoicing rise high as the listening skies, let it resound loud as the rolling sea."

It was many years ago in college that I took those words in and wrestled with their meaning. I was taking a class on African American Literature. We were starting our study of James Weldon Johnson's literary work. Imagine my surprise when I came across these words in the The Norton Anthology of African American Literature: "Molded by the classical education for which Atlanta University was best known, Johnson regarded his academic training as a trust given him in the expectation that he would dedicate his resources to black people. Immediately after college Johnson responded to this sense of obligation by becoming principal of Stanton School in his hometown. There in February 1900, he wrote "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing" for a school commemoration of Lincoln's birthday."

I invite you to read these words with fresh ears as disciples of Jesus Christ, who calls us all brothers and sisters. How can we love one another – without blame – without excuse – accepting accountability for those things that we need to change within ourselves – and seeking to lift each other up to reach the best that each of us can achieve. And may we forever see that if we lose our connection to God and fail to heed His command to Love The Lord our God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind as well as to love our neighbor as ourselves, we will never know the joy of the freedom of the Lord.

Lift ev'ry voice and sing,
Till earth and heaven ring,
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;
Let our rejoicing rise
High as the list'ning skies,
Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.
Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,

Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us;
Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,
Let us march on till victory is won.

Stony the road we trod,
Bitter the chast'ning rod,
Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;
Yet with a steady beat,
Have not our weary feet
Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?
We have come over a way that with tears has been watered,
We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered,
Out from the gloomy past,
Till now we stand at last
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.

God of our weary years,
God of our silent tears,
Thou who hast brought us thus far on the way;
Thou who hast by Thy might,
Led us into the light,
Keep us forever in the path, we pray.
Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met Thee,
Lest our hearts, drunk with the wine of the world, we forget Thee;
Shadowed beneath Thy hand,
May we forever stand,
True to our God,
True to our native land.

When we truly learn to love as God loves, then we will be able to live this truth:
"Blessed are those who dwell in Thy house, ever singing Thy praise! Psalm 84:4