

"In times of distance and of doubt when truth's ours to discern, humanity lies stripped and bare and for routine we yearn. Our faith, that God might nourish it to stand when we are weak, will guard and keep us through the night, and sing when we might speak."

QUARANTINE SINGING

Written by Marissa Hall



The words to the left are the first stanza of a hymn I wrote during my second month of quarantine. It encompasses what worshiping from home has been like for me: yearning for a steady routine, doubting the hope I have had that things will return to 'normal', asking God to nourish my faith, and still finding comfort in the ancient hymnody of the church that expresses what I cannot simply say. As a lover of hymns, I turn to old and familiar ones often, praying and singing them (which of course, is praying twice!) sometimes absentmindedly. As when I recite the Lord's Prayer or the Apostle's Creed, my body knows what comes next even when my mind struggles to keep up with what's happening the world around me.

As in our liturgies, the same words may resurface but each time they reveal new meanings when placed in the context of our contemporary life.

This has led me to think a lot recently about how the new and unknown can coexist with the old and familiar. The love and appreciation I have for weathered texts (especially ones with phrases like "schisms rent asunder" or my favorite, "we blossom and flourish like leaves on the tree, then wither and perish; but naught changeth thee") might seem, then, directly juxtaposed with my affinity for writing new ones. In a world where each day our news cycle brings fresh horrors and our technology brings more complications, new things are not often welcome. We Episcopalians pride ourselves on preserving rich tradition, but also admit to the less admirable quality of resisting change because, well, we just don't like it!

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What I have to keep telling myself, though, is that the willingness to accept and embrace what is new is the only way through this difficult time. In worship, that might be singing a new hymn to help us process the pain we are all feeling, or learning to use a new software program to allow us to see and connect with each other online, or even and especially for our choir, exploring a new way to sing – recording ourselves singing in our homes and exposing a layer of vulnerability which is new and at times uncomfortable.

In this season of needing familiarity and constants, I long for church on Sundays where we can dress our best, smell the wood floors and pews of the sanctuary, and see the stained glass reflected on the walls of our sacred space. The hard-to-swallow pill of worshipping from home can look and taste like disconnection - and for many, loneliness. The church has always been a place (and I don't necessarily mean physically) where people can come together for community, belonging, and mission. But being together is taking on a new meaning these days when we cannot "gather." I saw a post on social media recently that read:

"We isolate now / so that when we gather again / no one is missing."

I loved it for its simplicity and truth, but also for the way that it also envelops the new and the old – our new practices making space for the old ones to return, when it is safe.

In the weeks and months ahead, I pray that we might find joy in the ways we can be together when we cannot gather and that we might rejoice in the steadfastness of God who is simultaneously "ay the same" and making all things new.

Marissa Hall, former adult choir member and sacred music intern at St. John's Episcopal Church, came to Tallahassee from Boston at the end of March to be with her parents during the pandemic. She has been working remotely for the music programs at Trinity Church, Copley Square and St. Peter's Church in Cambridge.