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I. Introduction

Though the fig tree does not blossom,  
and no fruit is on the vines;  
though the produce of the olive fails  
and the fields yield no food;  
though the flock is cut off from the fold  
and there is no herd in the stalls,  
yet I will rejoice in the Lord;  
I will exult in the God of my salvation.  
God, the Lord, is my strength;  
he makes my feet like the feet of a deer,  
and makes me tread upon the heights.
Dictionary.com defines the verb *rejoice* as to “make glad,” “to fill with joy.” This definition presupposes an emptiness or lack of joy within the heart, mind and spirit. The above words from the prophet Habukkuk poignantly allude to this emptiness, using agricultural images of his day that spoke of not having the means of prosperity or literally survival. The prophet vows in this time of want and deprivation to rejoice, to literally find joy again, in the salvation of God.

The African American church has been the place where our people have found the means and wherewithal to, in the words of the old landmark, “keep on keeping on,” grounded in the hope in God in Christ Jesus of a better day compared to the present evil of institutional racism. The replenishment of this joy through preaching is important, but equally as vital is the role of music. This unit celebrates the choir anniversary, and the faithful people who have made musical contributions through the years to help us, in the words of the apostle Paul even as he was imprisoned, to “rejoice in the Lord always” (Philippians 4:4).

The above lyrics, from Quincy Jones’ recording “I Heard That,” succinctly capture both the purpose and importance of music. Music has within its’ lyrics, melody and rhythm, the capacity to touch our hearts, renew our spirit and “take us higher.” This is precisely what choirs do through the power of music. Their songs take us higher in worship and our spiritual location. Choir anniversary provides an opportunity to celebrate the Choir’s commitment and contribution to worship through music.

II. Choral History

Praise him with trumpet sound;  
praise him with lute and harp!  
Praise him with tambourine and dance;  
praise him with strings and pipe!  
Praise him with the clash of cymbals,  
praise him with resounding cymbals.  
Let everything that has breath praise the LORD.  
Praise the LORD.

- Psalm 150: 3-6

The Free On-Line Dictionary defines a *choir* as “an organized group of singers, especially one performing church music or singing in a church.” The tradition of choral singing can be traced back to ancient choruses in Greek dramas. Earliest forms of choral
sacred music date to the fifth century, when the Christian church emerged as the principal religious and political institution in Europe. During this century, Pope Gregory I is believed to have codified and collected music known as Gregorian chants. The Renaissance (approximately 1420-1600) saw the emergence of choral music beyond the confines of the church, and the Baroque period (1750-1820) contained oratorios of famed composers Jonathan Sebastian Bach and George Frederic Handel. Music such as Handel’s famed Messiah was in fact choral music accompanying operas written for monarchs in Europe. According to Jocelyn Low, early choral singing in the United States during this time was relatively conservative and plain, based on religious texts and simple tunes. American choral music gained wings in the nineteenth century when composers began to write in a variety of styles, using secular as well as sacred texts.

III. Our Choral History

“In the dark and terrible days of slavery, there rose up from the souls of inspired men and women, certain lyrics. And when they thought about the agonizing darkness of the dehumanization and degradation of their situation, they sang

Kum Bah ya, Kum Bah ya
Come by here, dear Lord.”

Edna Tatum speaks the above as she introduces an arrangement of “Kum Bah ya” from the 1997 recording No One Else by Kurt Carr and the Kurt Carr Singers. I have always loved this introduction as it speaks both succinctly and poetically to the importance of spirituals. These songs, influenced by the memory of African musical and cultural traditions, gave expression to the plight of our people during the period of slavery from 1619-1865. Moreover, spirituals gave musical expression to the indomitable spirit of a people that would not be broken by our condition. According to the Dr. Wyatt Tee Walker, a contemporary of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Pastor Emeritus of Canaan Baptist Church of Christ in Harlem, spirituals were the product of the “invisible church” in the day. While plantation owners instilled a biblical interpretation to maintain the ownership of their property, spirituals gave evidence to a biblical interpretation that spoke to liberation and freedom:

The “invisible church” consisted of services conducted among slaves, illegal in many instances, where the worship took on an altogether different tone from the tone in those services held under the auspices of the plantation owners. They met from place to place on individual plantations and sometimes on adjoining or nearby plantations out of earshot from the masters “big house.” This “invisible church” was a direct response to the hypocrisy of the owner’s faith and practice.

Spirituals were not only a direct response to the hypocritical faith of slave owners, they were also a call to action. Contained in their rhythms, calls and responses, and biblical imagery were coded messages which enabled our ancestors to obtain their freedom. Spirituals, in their lyrics and melodies, contained the means of rejoicing in the hope of God for deliverance and liberation.
Didn’t my Lord deliver Daniel
Deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel
Didn’t my Lord deliver Daniel
An’ why not every man?

He delivered Daniel f’om de lion’s den
Jonah f’om the belly of de whale
An’ de Hebrew children f’om de fiery furnace
An’ why not every man

The above spiritual is one of several included in Alvin Ailey’s signature creation, *Revelations*. Dr. Walker makes mention of *Revelations* as an “ingenious use of Spiritual based themes to create an entire dance repertoire.” Running thirty eight minutes, songs in this composition include “I’ve Been Buked,” “Fix Me,” and “Wade in the Water.” I’ve had the fortune of singing this music as part of the live choir in performances of this work with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater at the City Center in New York, and can testify firsthand to the power of this music combined with the beauty of the choreography. Video excerpts, as well as a discussion of *Revelations* by famed dancer and Artistic Director Judith Jamison, are available at [www.alvinailey.org](http://www.alvinailey.org).

African Americans not only sang spirituals during this time, our congregations also sang hymns tracing back to those included in *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, published in 1707 by Isaac Watts. Segregated from their white brothers and sisters in Methodist, Baptist, and AME churches, our congregations sang this relatively more sedate music. But we did not sing these hymns the same way. Black meter music spanned the period of slavery and reconstruction and persisted into the twentieth century. Hymns were sung without accompaniment, often with the song leader (often a deacon) giving two lines to the congregation followed by the congregation singing the same two lines in “meter,” defined similar to the notion of meter in poetry where long and short syllables in the verses of the hymns are rhythmically arranged into groups called feet. The leader and congregation would engage in the call and response of a metered hymn until the end when all would hum the lines, or do what could be called “moaning.”

I fondly remember in my childhood Deacon Wiggins lining the following hymn during devotional services (now called Praise and Worship) at my childhood church in Washington, DC.

I heard the voice of Jesus say
Come unto me and rest
Lay down thy weary one lay down
Thy head upon my breast

I came to Jesus as I was,
Weary worn and sad
I found in him a resting place
And he has made me glad

A fine example of a metered hymn was recently posted on YouTube by Mourners Bench Records. “When I Read My Title Clear” is rendered in true metered hymn fashion by Rev. Lonnie Weaver. It can be found by accessing the link http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wVw_ncYU8wc.

Spirituals and metered hymns were the means by which our people found means and cause to rejoice during the very hard times of slavery, Jim Crow, and legal segregation. These are traditions to embrace in our congregations today as our musical heritage and legacy.

IV. Rejoicing in the Good News: The Beginnings of Gospel Music

Some scholars see the metered hymns noted above as the beginning of gospel music with the singing of congregations and choirs. But choirs in our churches also sang the hymns of Charles Albert Tindley (1851-1933). Songs such as “Stand by Me,” “Nothing Between,” and “We’ll Understand It Better By and By” are songs embraced by our churches to this day. Songs by Tindley, Lucie Campbell, and Thomas A. Dorsey are included in Gospel Pearls. Published in 1921 by the National Baptist Convention, this collection used the name “gospel” to describe the newly evolving style that was present in Baptist, Methodist, and African Methodist Episcopal (AME) congregations as well as churches in the Pentecostal traditions of the Church of God in Christ and the Holiness Church. This was hardly the first hymnal written for African American congregations. That honor goes to Richard Allen, the founder of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, who led the way in the publication of the first hymnal specifically designed for use by African American congregations. In 1801, Allen compiled a hymnal entitled A Collection of Spiritual Songs and Hymns. This hymnal contained 54 hymns, about a third of which were composed by white hymn writers, such as Charles Wesley and Isaac Watts. Yet, Gospel Pearls was a clear indication of what was to come in our churches regarding the significance and importance of gospel music for worship and the spiritual well-being of our congregations.

V. Thomas A. Dorsey

Thomas A. Dorsey is well recognized as the Father of Gospel music. He says that he coined the words “gospel songs” in the early 20’s after hearing a group of five singers on the far south side of Chicago. Before then he says that music sung by churches were called “evangelistic” songs. Dorsey’s first gospel hit was written in 1926 following the death of a neighbor, a taxi driver who lived in an apartment above him:

He went to work one morning and came home so sick. They put hot packs on his stomach and we stayed up all night with him. But by then the appendicitis had set in. They took him to the hospital and he died that very night. I was in a quandary. I’d been sick for eight months and this boy’d been ill not twenty-four hours and died. So the message came to me “If You See My Savior.”
If You See My Savior
Words and music by Thomas A. Dorsey

I was standing by the bedside of a neighbor
Who was just about to cross the swelling tide
And I ask him if he would me a favor

Kindly take this message to the other side

You may come across my father and my mother
And the burdens of this life they may recall
You may chance to see my sister or my brother
Please do try to see my Savior first of all

If you my Savior tell him that you saw me
When you saw me I was on my way
You may meet some old friend who may ask you
Tell them I am coming home some day

“If You See My Savior” has been recorded by artists ranging from Mahalia Jackson to Anne Murray. You may hear and obtain an MP3 recording of this song sung by Thomas Dorsey from www.lala.com.

Dorsey went on to compose many gospel songs, including his masterpiece “Precious Lord Precious Take My Hand,” during the period when our congregations endured the hardships of the Great Depression. Dorsey wanted his songs to lift the spirits of the unemployed laborers and domestics who comprised his audiences: He said “I wanted to give them something to lift them out of that Depression. They could sing at church, but the singing had no life, no spirit.” It is clear from Dorsey’s statement that the intent of his music, the form we know as gospel, was aimed at giving our people a means to find joy again, to rejoice, in hard times just as spirituals and metered hymns enabled our people to endure and stay strong in prior eras. Since then, gospel singers, choirs, quartets, and ensembles have been raising their voices, calling for people to find joy on Sunday mornings and strength for the other days of the week.

VI. The Choir Anniversary: A Personal Recollection

I must confess to having almost a “giddy-like” excitement when asked to do this unit. I have been singing in church off and on since childhood. I began singing with the Junior Choir at St. Stephen Baptist Church (formerly in Washington DC, now in Temple Hills MD) before I joined the congregation. I then “graduated” to the teen group, the St. Stephen’s Chariots, and was a charter member of the Intermediate Choir (who have been renamed the Progressive Choraleers and are directed by my sister Vanessa Jones).
At my undergraduate alma mater Swarthmore I sang and was Director of the Swarthmore College Gospel Choir. And, after graduation, I’ve also been blessed to sing with the Tri-Boro Mass Choir, the Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir, and am a member of the Riverside Inspirational Choir, the church where I have been a member for sixteen years. Even my first call to ordained ministry contained a musical component, as I served as Director of the Jerriese Johnson East Village Gospel Choir while serving as Minister, Community Life and Outreach at Middle Collegiate Church in New York. So singing in choirs has played a key role in my own spiritual life and formation and is something I love to do.

Choir anniversaries were special events during my childhood years. At the time, at St. Stephen Baptist Church, we had no less than seven choirs. All had anniversaries and all were special events in our church year. The programs would begin generally at 5 p.m. The choirs, including those invited as special guests, would march to the pews in a grand procession. Then it was time to welcome the honorees of the evening, who generally took off their normal Sunday service robes for more formal attire sometimes to the point of gowns and tuxedos. My mother, Deaconess Emma Palmer, is a gifted seamstress and often made dresses for the occasion. When all came to their places, it was time for the program to begin, which was often emceed by Sister Gracie Butler. The program included a selection from the choir celebrating the anniversary, an introduction of its’ officers and members, a welcome address from someone in the choir or the congregation, a response from a member of a visiting choir, a narration of the history (we were often pleased during the years when it was announced that “all officers remained the same”) and, of course, music. Choirs from our church sang as well as choirs invited from churches around the city. And the Spirit came at several points during the course of the evening, making the anniversaries affairs that I remember fondly to this day.

The Harold Smith Majestics of Detroit were a well-known choir and well-recorded (often in the Detroit area) for many years. They were best known for recording with James Cleveland the gospel classic “Lord, Help Me to Hold Out.” There is a video of the 1983 anniversary concert in Detroit where this choir is marching to another classic from my teen years, “I’ll Get Home Someday,” originally recorded by late the Reverend Maceo Woods and the Christian Tabernacle Concert Choir. The procession is a joy to behold, with legendary organist and recording artist Charles Nix from the St. James Missionary Baptist Church at work on the pedals and each choir member walking in military precision, right hand up as they make their way to the choir stand. It’s worth every moment of the six minutes and thirty seconds of the video, and Nix’s organ alone is enough for one to put their “shoutin shoes” on. You may enjoy it too by accessing the link www.youtube.com/watch?v=M4ds5T2Qf8I@feature=related.

VII. Songs That Speak to the Moment

Given the above memories of choir anniversaries, I can think of no better songs to include for this moment than those sung during my childhood and teen years at St. Stephen Baptist Church. They were songs that made our church the place where we could find the strength, dignity of being, and faith born of the Spirit to rejoice, to “keep on keeping on” in times that were often trying, difficult, and empty of joy. We would come
in on Sunday looking for the presence of God, and God came many times when these songs were offered during the worship. The first of these were aptly included in a medley from Kurt Carr’s CD No One Else entitled “Songs that Brought Us Over.” There is no question in my mind that they did just that:

1) St. Stephen Junior Choir
   “I’ve Decided to Make Jesus My Choice”
   Words and music recorded by Harrison Johnson
   On recording Collection by Harrison Johnson and the Los Angeles Community Choir
   Nashboro Records, 1995
   Available through www.Amazon.com

2) St. Stephen Senior Choir
   “Have Faith in God,” traditional
   Recorded by the Brockington Ensemble (Philadelphia PA), on CD Celebrating Jesus,
   Damaestro Music, 2008
   Available through www.cduniverse.com and downloads are available at www.mp3.com

3) St. Stephen Chariots
   “Where Is Your Faith in God”
   Words and music by Rev. James Cleveland
   On recording James Cleveland: Original Gospel Classics
   Available through www.cduniverse.com

4) St. Stephen Gospel Chorus
   “Show Some Sign (If you Got Good Religion)”
   Soloist: Sister L. Dorn
   Composed by Dorothy Norwood
   Originally recorded by the Caravans
   Available on Recording The Best of the Caravans, Savoy Records, 1977
   Recording and mp3 available on www.amazon.com

5) St. Stephen Specials
   “When Trouble Comes (Stretch Out)”
   Soloist: Sister M. Fleming
   Originally recorded by the Institutional Radio Choir, Institutional COGIC
   On recording He Holdeth the Reigns (reissue) Liquid 8 Records 2004
   Available through www.Amazon.com

6) St Stephen Second Choir
   “There’s a Bright Side Somewhere”
   Soloist: Sister M. Turner
   Special chorus arr. by Joseph Joubert
   Available in African-American Heritage Hymnal
   Chicago, GIA Publications, 2001, Hymn Number 411
7) St. Stephen Male Chorus
“Waiting for My Child (to Come Home)”
Duet: Sister S. Ables and Bro R. Myers
Originally recorded by the Consolers
On recording The Best of the Consolers, Nashboro Records 1995
Available through www.amazon.com

VIII. Why We Sing

In November 2006, I had the privilege of attending a choir anniversary that was just as I remembered choir anniversaries from my childhood. At the time, I was Director of the Jerriese Johnson East Village Gospel Choir at Middle Collegiate Church in New York City, and we had been invited to celebrate the 125th anniversary of the Chancel Choir at Dewitt Reformed Church on the Lower East Side. The service had everything I remembered, the grand procession, the special guest choir, the welcome address and response, and much music. We sang two selections, Glenn Burleigh’s “Jesus is a Rock in a Weary Land,” my very favorite gospel arrangements of the spiritual. Then we went back to the old landmark and sung the classic “Walk by Faith Each Day” with Arlene Gottfried at the solo. Upon singing that song, the program was interrupted for twenty minutes as the Spirit came in and the congregation shouted and praised God.

During my remarks I congratulated the Chancel Choir for what it had done for an amazing amount of time. For one-hundred twenty five years, members of this choir have come together and sacrificed time in their lives to rehearse for Sunday mornings and other engagements, and have thereby created community not only in the congregation but among themselves.

Some of my very best friends are people that I’ve sung with, people who I’ve come to know from rehearsals, traveling together, and standing with one another on Sunday mornings. Not only do choirs minister to the congregations, they also minister to the persons who are members of them. The choir anniversary is the time to celebrate the contributions of those who encourage, extol, and cause, by the combination of music and the Spirit, the people to rejoice, to find strength in God even “when the fig tree does not blossom and no fruit is on the vines.” It is the time to thank God for those who minister through music, and pray their continued faithfulness and dedication in doing so.

Ms. Camille G. Brown is a member of the Inspirational Choir at Riverside where I sing. We sang her composition, “Singing in the Choir,” a couple of years ago as the beginning to our annual concert. Her lyrics speak well to the meaning and significance of choirs at this time in our church year and throughout our church year.

Singing in the Choir
O how I love to sing in the choir
It has always been my desire
To praise the Lord with music divine
Oh, singing in the choir is a blessing of mine

‘Cause when you sing the choir you love one another
Singing in the choir Holy Spirit takes over
When you sing in the choir it eases your sorrow
Singing in the choir makes a brighter tomorrow

‘Cause when you sing in the choir it is such a sensation
Singing in the choir brings joy and jubilation
When we sing in the choir we let it known
Through war flood fire God is still on the throne.

Let the Church say Amen!

IX. Resources for further Study


Notes

6. Ibid., p. 61.
7. Ibid., p. 63.