

*Songs in Our Hearts, Hearts on Our Sleeves* (Psalm 146)  
Jeremy Rutledge, Covenant Church  
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I need to begin this proclamation with a simple confession: I have been really discouraged. My discouragement isn't personal. In fact, in my own life things are going swimmingly. My health has been good lately, my family is enjoying the picnics and pool parties of the hot months, and the addition of a piano in our home has led to the occasional impromptu sing-along. In short, it's been one of the best summers I can remember. But running through it has been this sense of discouragement; not with the way my own life is, but with the way our shared life is. The news of our shared life has not been good – not this week, not this month, not all year long. Perhaps you know what I mean.

Some mornings I feel almost speechless as I unroll the paper or squint into the glow of my computer to read the news. Along with the rest of you, I have watched as our country continues to escalate its war in Afghanistan, prosecute a still grisly status quo in Iraq, and routinely fire missiles into all kinds of other places from Pakistan to Yemen. I have watched as our sister state of Arizona has devised and at least partially implemented an anti-migrant law that turns people into criminal suspects based on the color of their skin. I have listened to the shrill voices in this and similar debates, pointing fingers at the “other” as they sow the seeds of every kind of fear. I have followed the ongoing blatant discrimination against gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people who continue to be denied basic rights of citizenship like a license to marry or an invitation to serve openly in the military. I have paid close attention to the national dialogue on race, which

is not a dialogue at all, but rather more a shouting match, as charges of racism are hurled back and forth without any deep discussion of our country's history or the institutional structures of privilege that remain so firmly in place. And, Lord, if we haven't all watched our lifeblood, this beautiful Gulf Coast suffer week after week as an uncapped well oiled the waters and all that live in and around them. I could go on, but perhaps I've made my case for feeling discouraged. Yet I know that feeling discouraged is not enough. So I have done something that, it turns out, has helped a great deal; it has been a tonic of sorts, a shot in the arm for the weary soul. And this morning, if nothing else happens, I mean to commend it to you: I've been listening to a lot of Pete Seeger.

Now some of you know right away why this is such a good idea. You not only know who Pete Seeger is, but you have some of his songs inscribed on your hearts. Perhaps your toes are already tapping. But I am afraid a great many people still do not know or perhaps have forgotten this great American folk singer. So I'd like to spend just a moment offering an image or two that we might all hold on to. For if Pete did anything he created songs that people could sing while they worked, tunes that they could hum to keep their spirits up, and harmonies that infected hearers with an upbeat sense that the world they dreamed about was possible so long as they were willing to work and to sing. And the more I have listened to Pete Seeger this summer, the more I have sung to my own discouragement that it ought to be moving along.

Pete Seeger is now in his 90s. He still lives in upstate New York on a parcel of land overlooking the Hudson River. A 2007 documentary about his life begins

with a quiet scene of Pete chopping his own firewood in the forest near his home.<sup>1</sup> He is a wiry old man in dusty blue jeans and a ball cap, his face marked by a white beard and the trace of a smile as he walks down the path with a double-bladed axe resting on his shoulder. In short, he appears to be living a life of relative simplicity and happiness. In interviews his voice is warm and content. Yet the subjects of which he speaks are anything but easy.

Pete's life was marked by extraordinary events, both too wonderful and too terrible to really get a hold of, but a short list would include just the following: He was raised in a musical family where his father shared strong opinions about bringing music to the people. He fell in love with American folk music at an early age, took up the banjo, and never put it down. He joined with the Communist Party in the 1930s because they supported workers and they opposed racial segregation (when no one else did). He served in the U. S. Army during the Second World War. He returned to become a professional folk singer, but he was blacklisted for his previous affiliation with the Communist Party. For close to two decades he was kept off radio and television, though he played to audiences around the country. He became deeply involved in the Civil Rights Movement and lent himself to its music, including his revision and popularization of the old workers song "I'll Overcome" (which Zilphia Horton had begun to sing as "We Will Overcome" and Pete changed to "We Shall Overcome" before adding new

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<sup>1</sup> *Pete Seeger: The Power of Song*. DVD, dir. Jim Brown (2007; Santa Monica: The Miriam Collection, 2008).

verses like “We’ll walk hand in hand.”)<sup>2</sup> He would later rise as one of the strongest voices in opposition to the war in Vietnam, joining with many other folk singers to make music that defined the era. And as an old man he launched a campaign to clean up the Hudson River, sailing up and down its banks to play songs and host picnics as people organized to care for their little patch of Earth. It’s an extraordinary list of achievements, but to listen to Pete tell it, he didn’t really plan the course of any of these events. He just saw one problem at a time, picked up his banjo, and got people together to sing and to work. And something in the singing made the work a labor of love.

It’s difficult to say how subversive a song can be, how a tune can work its way into your head and show up as a smile on your face, a spring in your step, or a whistle as you put your thinking cap on. But there is something sustaining in music, something that truly does keep us going. Every one in this room knows it. For we gather here, week after week, to lay down those God awful newspapers and lift up our heads to sing loudly (if not always well) of our faith, hopes, and dreams; we gather here, week after week, to have our spirits buoyed on the rivers of sound flowing from the pipe organ or the intricate currents of a choral harmony; and we gather here, week after week, to deal in more than the solitary spoken word as we literally and figuratively join ourselves in music. If you’re like me, then perhaps every once in a while you come into the service fairly discouraged, your heart damaged and despairing. But the music lifts your soul,

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<sup>2</sup> David King Dunaway, *How Can I Keep from Singing? The Ballad of Pete Seeger* (New York: Villard Books, 2008), 275.

and by the time we get to the closing hymn, the choral benediction, or the postlude, your heart has found its song again; you can pin it back on your sleeve and go out to love this broken world for another week. I think Pete was on to that truth, and though he wasn't a regular churchgoer, he did speak of his own faith in people with principles and a willingness to raise their voices. One story, which he tells on occasion, offers a testimony to the power of a shared song.

In the late 1960s Pete and his wife, Toshi, were approached by a man after Pete had sung at a festival. Among other things, Pete had sung his popular song "Waist Deep in the Big Muddy," which was a strong statement of opposition to the war in Vietnam. The man who approached him was a returning veteran, and he broke the silence very awkwardly as he extended his hand. "Mr. Seeger," the man said, "I think I should tell you, I came here this afternoon to kill you."<sup>3</sup> This got Pete's attention rather quickly, and he listened intently as the man went on to explain – he had come to the concert full of anger having heard that some Communist sympathizer was singing against the war. As a veteran he thought of his friends who had died in Vietnam and he was filled with outrage. Yet after he arrived at the show he began to listen to the songs and their lyrics. They were so full of hope and peace that he joined for a moment in the singing. Before he knew it, he had been singing all night. He felt better, he said. The word he used was "cleansed." He felt cleansed. And as he explained this to Pete, the folk singer responded in the most natural way he knew. He reached for his banjo and

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<sup>3</sup> Alec Wilkinson, *The Protest Singer: An Intimate Portrait of Pete Seeger* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009), 101. See also the DVD *Pete Seeger: The Power of Music*.

together the two of them began to sing, “Where Have All the Flowers Gone?” They sang together in a tender two-part harmony.

I don’t know if Jesus sang songs as he walked and worked for the beloved community he wanted, but I can’t imagine him otherwise. Surely, he, too, felt discouraged and needed to sing a bit to revive his spirit. And if he did, then perhaps he sang some of the songs that any Hebrew kid might have learned, the psalms passed down from one generation to the next that told of a God who was present in the people’s struggle. At least that’s what this morning’s psalm relates. After an opening shout of praise, the song advises the weary and the downhearted not to put their faith where it doesn’t belong. Do not put your trust in princes, the song sings, for their breath is gone in an instant and their plans come quickly to perish. Put your trust instead in the divine, known in and through the world and the creativity it is shot through with.

The psalmist’s God is not found in the princes and their politics, but rather in the greater movement toward justice and the longing that stirs in each of us to join ourselves with that movement. His God is the one who is known as the oppressed are remembered, the hungry are fed, the prisoners are freed, and the blind are restored to sight. His God is the God of liberation for everyone who feels that they haven’t got a fair shake, that the cards are stacked against them, or that no one hears their cry. His God, to put it in our language, is the God who inspires work for peace in Afghanistan and Iraq, work to welcome the poor and the migrant worker in every state, work to include people of all sexual orientations and identity as equals, work searching our country’s history for the racism that

still wounds and divides us, and work to clean, protect, and preserve the sea and sky of this our natural home. The psalmist's God, in short, might fit right into a Pete Seeger song. Because his God is taking sides and inviting everyone to join in; everyone who is willing to sing and to work. It's enough to put a smile on your face. Because not only do we have in our American history a lanky old banjo player to lift our spirits. We have in our faith tradition a righteous old Hebrew who said we'd find God in the struggle. Something in that ought to get us moving. Something in that ought to start us singing. And with that spirit in mind, we might just end on a musical invitation.

To the world weary, the downtrodden, and the deeply discouraged: Take this afternoon to put away your morning newspaper. Switch off your 24-hour news channels and for God's sakes forgo your AM radio. Turn instead to your CD player, your iPod, or, if you're lucky, your own stringed instrument or piano. And play yourself some Pete Seeger. A good old-fashioned song of hope. Something that still believes that the world can be changed. Something that still believes each of us has a role to play in it, a part to sing in the great chorus. Then, when the music is loud enough and you start to feel it, just sing your heart out. Sing of the world you want. Sing of the dreams you have. And sing to your troubles that they ought to be moving on. Consider it a work song. Consider it a spiritual. Consider it a hymn of praise to the psalmist's God or to Pete's – the divine that we still might find as we work together for a better world.

May it be so.