



Chad Fothergill
Editor, *CrossAccent*

In the Emptiness, God Is

Throughout the past months, we have become fluent in a new, pandemic-generated lexicon. We use gerund forms of verbs (*-ing*) to describe such essential actions as *masking* and *distancing*. We have come to understand the difference between *droplets* and *aerosols*, and we have debated semantic distinctions of labels for this prolonged experience, such as *fasting*, *wilderness*, and *exile*. Style guides for publications have marshaled ink and pixels to justify their preferences for *Covid-19* and *COVID-19*; for *live streaming* and *livestreaming*; for *black* and *Black*; for *BIPOC* and for eschewing such labels altogether. And most of us have probably used modal verb constructions—*would have*, *could have*, *should have*—to suggest possibilities and alternate outcomes. “Our choir would have sung a newly commissioned piece on Easter Sunday.” “Perhaps our congregation could have invested in livestreaming capabilities earlier.” “This issue of *CrossAccent* should have been about composition.”

Yes, this issue of *CrossAccent* was originally intended to help cantors compose, arrange, adapt, and transcribe for their contexts and assemblies—weekly psalmody, descants for transposing instruments, repertoire analyses, and more. However, like many springtime anthem and rehearsal schedules, those preparations were swiftly discarded as the pandemic’s effects began to be measured not in terms of weeks but months. In their place, keywords for our vocation—*church*, *assembly*, *communion*, *singing*—took on new dimensions and meanings. Many of us found ourselves adrift in uncharted terrain. In April, the ALCM board endorsed and encouraged a new plan for this issue that would consider the pandemic’s wide-ranging effects; this was undertaken in partnership with the Institute of Liturgical Studies at Valparaiso University, whose co-directors—Jennifer Baker-Trinity

and Brian Johnson—served as additional readers on the journal’s editorial board.

The essays that follow—a mixture of longer articles and shorter reflections by theologians, pastors, cantors, and a physician—were received between early May and late July. Some describe individual and communal responses both to the pandemic and to the widespread unrest following the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis. Some explore practical and theological implications for the months and seasons to come. Some give tools to cope with grief and loss. In one way or another, all give reason to hope. In addition, our conscientious music reviewers selected both newer and older pieces that speak to the moment, sometimes suggesting ways in which they can be rendered with reduced forces or through digital means.

Rather than introduce all of the essays here, as has been the journal’s customary practice, I commend our contributors’ collective knowledge and insight to you. And in place of the usual book reviews, you will find a list of titles (beginning on p. 81) that address timely topics, among them worship in the digital age; issues of race and justice in the church and its music; science and faith; an affirming embrace of language and metaphor about “darkness”; and silence.

As this issue materialized, two texts remained at the forefront of my thoughts. The first, a reflection by Susan Palo Cherwien, reminds us of God’s abiding presence even as we lament upended plans, worldly chaos, and silent sanctuaries. “In the emptiness, God is,” she writes, adding:

When the psalmist cried out from the pit,
God was already there.
When we cry out from the deep night,
God is already there.
When the silence is roaring in our minds,
God is there.

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Her characteristic wisdom is especially apt for our circumstances: even when “we are emptied of our paltry projects and goals,” when “our grandiose and prideful accomplishments run aground,” or when we are isolated, we cannot flee from the presence of God, for “God is.”¹ The second, a stirring and urgent paraphrase of the Magnificat paired with a brisk Irish melody (*ELW* 723), poses a timely question: “could the world be about to turn?” The stanza and refrain texts resonate with the arresting images of burning fires and food lines that, for many weeks, accompanied the daily news, a reminder of the radical reorientation—societal, economic, ecological—and perpetual “turning” brought about by God’s promised reign of justice.

This season of yearning and expectation has felt much like a protracted Advent. How long must we wait, O God? When will you rend the heavens and pour down righteousness? Come, Lord Jesus! And yet—just as we need silence to make sense of sound, just as we need the gift of darkness to see glittering stars in the firmament—perhaps this wilderness journey will help us perceive something new about our vocation or community that was previously hidden by the hustle and bustle of routine.

Regardless of its translation or musical setting, Mary’s song reminds us that normalcy is temporary. Though “normal,” a word often framed by quotation marks in this issue, may provide a sense of calm or stability, it often implies a status quo where injustice is present in some form or another. Our pandemic lexicon naturally expresses our desires for a return to “normal,” yet we should be mindful of what that connotes for our respective contexts, assemblies, and communities. Our wise contributors have given us a framework to think about these things so that, someday, we can together sing a more profound Kyrie, psalm, “alleluia,” or Magnificat.

Until then, we trust God’s promises to heal, restore, and bless all creation, and to be an ever-present help in time of trouble. In silence and turning, in wilderness and wondering, and in all times and places, we pray and sing: “God is.”

Birmingham, AL
Mary, Mother of Our Lord
August 15, 2020

Note

1. Susan Palo Cherwien, “God Is in Silence,” in *Crossings: Meditations for Worship* (St. Louis: MorningStar, 2003), 46.

Abbreviations frequently used in this journal include:

- BWV *Bach-Werke-Verzeichnis* (“Bach Works Catalog”)
 CW *Christian Worship* (1993)
 ELW *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (2006)
 LBW *Lutheran Book of Worship* (1978)
 LSB *Lutheran Service Book* (2006)
 TFF *This Far by Faith* (1999)
 TLH *The Lutheran Hymnal* (1941)

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