Who Is My Shepherd?

Every Sunday until I was well into adolescence was spent at church. Wake up at 8:00, get dressed in the same blue dress, pink tights, too-big hand-me-down heels, toes stuffed with tissues to stop my feet from slipping around, no breakfast, just a mug of warm water and vitamins. Help strap my brother into his car seat, drive to church, park two blocks away because we're late and there are no parking spots left, rush in and forget the holy water at the door, rush back to the door to stand on my tip-toes and dip my fingers into the bowl of fragrant, chilly water, do the sign of the cross, ignore the cold water dripping down my temple, rush back to my family's pew, kneel and sign of the cross again (I didn't forget this time), rise and sit next to my mother, pick up my hymn book, ignore my growling stomach and try not to make eye contact with the plaster Jesus full of bloody holes that stands in an alcove right next to our pew.

The psalms and hymns are by far my favorite part of Sunday service, followed closely by the thin wafers (sorry, I mean the body of Christ) passed out during communion that mean we only have a few more minutes left until the end of service. I can't read music at six years old, and won't learn for another few years, but it doesn't matter here. The cantor does it for me, chanting out the words to a melody I only have to repeat.

"My Lord is my Shepherd, he goes before me. Defender behind me, I won't fear," the cantor sings to a silent room.

"I am not alone, he's my comfort, always holds me close," we sing back.

Psalms are a fundamental element of worship in Catholicism and Judaism, consisting of one line sung out loud by a cantor, which is then repeated by the rest of the congregation. It

usually starts with a call for worshippers to become closer to God in some way, and ends with a prayer, often outlining why worshippers should become closer to God. While this structure exists in the bibles we use today, the structure of modern call and response worship songs can be traced back to civilizations as ancient as Mesopotamia.

In the history of Roman Catholicism, call-and-response songs, often referred to as responsorial psalms, have been performed during services since the 16th century, when low literacy rates prevented church-goers from being able to read the words in their bibles and hymn books. This inability to fully participate in worship informed the practice of "lining out", or singing one line of a song, and then allowing the congregation to repeat the same line back. Centuries later, with the invasion of North America by Western Europeans, lining out became an integral part of American worship, particularly in African-American churches.

In the year of our lord 2010, I rustle anxiously in a pew of a Roman Catholic church in Glendale, California. Maybe a young girl in Mesopotamia did the same, wiggling in between her seated parents, eons before my existence. I ignore the meaningless notes in my hymn book, instead focusing on just the words, trusting my untrained voice to blend into all the others, doing my best to mimic the cantor's steady, droning tune.

The voices next to me and from the far corners of the church mix with mine, echoing against the lofty ceiling, bouncing off the colored light flowing in through the stained-glass windows, becoming one voice that fills all the empty space in the room, becoming one voice that has existed for millennia.

After service is sweet relief in the form of hot, savory chicken empanadas served in the lush courtyard by plump, wrinkly Aunties. I pay by allowing them to pinch my cheeks and finger my hair and fuss with the ribbons on my dress. My favorite Auntie's empanadas have raisins mixed into the filling. I isolate them in my mouth, chew and swallow the dough and chicken, then tongue out the raisins held between my gums and cheek and bite them individually, letting their sweet-salty juice burst on my tongue. My fingers still greasy from the empanadas, my mother rushes me across the street to Sunday School at the Catholic elementary school. Then, another hour of blah, blah, Jonah, blah, Noah, blah, God is all around you, blah, blah, He sees everything, blah, rosaries, blah.

But even the dedicated years of weekly Catholic services couldn't save me from damnation. From the ages of 12 to 20 years old, I do not think about God, save for the night my cat, Jetsom, runs away from our new house in Seattle, and I stay up until midnight praying to God, *please please please I'll do anything please bring him home please keep him safe I don't want him to get hit by a car please please in the name of the father the son and the holy ghost Amen*. Hours later, my father comes home with Jetsom wrapped in a towel, shivering from the cold rain and yowling hysterically. My prayers are answered, but I still can't believe. I thank God, but I know that no one is up there listening. Later that night, in the living room after Jetsom is comforted with a warm towel and a hair dryer, I tell my mother that I don't believe in God. That prayer was a singular lapse in my belief that God does not exist, and I let her know.

"That's okay," she says, tolerant as ever, "you don't have to keep going to church if you don't want to." A part of me breaks when I realize that not believing in God means not attending

church, not singing, not seeing my friends or teacher every Sunday. But I am thirteen, and only I know what's best for me, and I do *not* believe in God and I would rather *die* than go to that stupid church anyways. She lets me stay home next Sunday.

I do not think about God, I do not pray, and I do not sing for eight years. Then, in my junior year of college, my friend Maggie and I drive to upstate New York for a Quaker music festival. Her family is Quaker and spend their weekends sitting in silence in Quaker meeting houses, awaiting the Inward Light to call them to speak.

The Quaker movement, often referred to as the Religious Society of Friends, originated in England in the 17th century with George Fox's radical belief that God existed inherently in everyone, in the form of an Inward Light. He avoided the use of denominational words like "church" because he believed it to be exclusionary, instead opting for words like "friends" and "meetings"; Quakers believe that anyone can live as Jesus did, because everyone has Jesus in them. Gradually, the Quaker movement became popular in America through the immigration of Quakers to North America, but also notably through Mary Fisher's and Ann Austin's missionary trip to the Americas in 1658. Fisher and Austin were both arrested for heresy, but the Quaker movement in New England persisted, and Quakers make up a large percentage of New Englanders today.

Although Quakerism has its roots in Christianity, many modern Quaker movements are completely secular, allowing any friend, from any religion, to attend meetings and feel the presence of the Inward Light. Maggie's parents are this type of Quaker– they eat Auntie Anne's mac and cheese, shop exclusively at farmer's markets, drive Priuses, and sew their own clothes.

Once a week, they attend “unprogrammed” meetings, a traditional form of congregation in which attendees sit in silent circles in order to communally receive the gift of the Inward Light, only speaking if they are called to voice the Light inside of them.

This weekend, though, will not be so silent. One of the main attractions of the Quaker music festival is called “pub-sing,” short for public singing. Like an unprogrammed Quaker meeting, singers sit silently in circles, and then decide to lead a call-and-response style song when they feel the Inward Light calling them to do so. I help Maggie’s parents load up their Prius with camping gear, then cram into the back seat for an hour-long drive to nearby fairgrounds, where we set up our minuscule tent and sleeping bags and unpack the propane cylinders to boil water for that night’s dinner. When it gets dark, we switch on the generator to light up the area around our tents. Mosquitoes and moths circle overhead.

After dinner, I follow Maggie to an old building with large, sliding doors on each wall, all swung open so that chatter overflows onto the dirt path. She tells me it is a repurposed barn. I nod, it still smells like horses. Inside, it is dark. The room is completely empty, no lights, no chairs, no tables. The space is lit only by what starlight comes in through the doors, and I can see people sitting in plastic adirondack chairs, foldable camping chairs, hammocks swung over large wooden beams that float overhead, all arranged in concentric circles. Some younger people are sitting on the ground between their parent’s legs. As we approach the doorway, it grows silent. It feels like they’re waiting for me. I know they’re not.

We set down our camping chairs, unfold them noisily and sit, bathing in the silence. I don’t know what I am waiting for. After a few minutes, it begins. Singing, deep and confident

and clear, from a vague form in front of me that I can barely make out in the darkness. The verses are slow and lonely, but when the chorus comes around, unsure voices join from quiet corners, and that first voice raises louder than all the others, guiding them in melody and words.

I shift uncomfortably in my chair, canvas rustling beneath me. It has always made me uncomfortable to listen to people sing. I never go to choir concerts, musicals, or opera for this reason. Some part of them has to open up to sing, and I am embarrassed for their vulnerability. In the darkness, I can't tell if I'm breaking out in anxious hives, but I feel the heat in my face and the sweat gathering on my palms. How does something that brought me so much joy as a child strike such terror in me now? I feel my mouth open, and the sound coming out. Am I singing? I think I am. I feel naked.

My voice is quiet, I can barely hear it underneath all the other voices. I'm sure my singing is terrible, starting on utterly wrong notes and sliding haphazardly into the right ones, but I don't think it matters as long as I'm doing it. I think, *this is what God is*. *This is where He must be*, I think. Finding my voice in the cacophony that surrounds me, I am transported to the Catholic church of my childhood. The echoing room, the guiding voice, the voices that follow, and the feeling that the millions of people who sang these songs before me are singing with me now. The feeling that my voice will carry on for centuries after this.

While the origins of responsorial religious singing are based in Abrahamic psalms, America has its own history with call-and-response singing, popularized by the working class and enslaved people. Common among the African diaspora was oral call-and-response storytelling, which was then brought to America by enslaved West Africans. Enslaved people

working on plantations often used call-and-response singing as a method of communication disguised as worship music. A song about the liberation of Jewish slaves might be sung as a message of hope for the abolition of slavery and the liberation of African-Americans. The legacy of these call and response songs lasted long after slavery, going on to influence other genres like blues, R&B, jazz, and gospel. African Americans are also credited with bringing the structure of call-and-response storytelling music outside of the plantations and onto ships, popularizing sea shanties that helped entertain sailors during long trips, as well as maintained a communal rhythm when rowing or hauling in an anchor or a net.

"Saint Patrick was an Irishman, he came from decent people," the anonymous voice belts.

The room responds, "Way haul away, we'll haul away Joe!"

"He built a church in Dublin town and put it on a steeple."

"Way haul away, we'll haul away Joe!"

After one song, the room still echoing from the final harmony, everyone is silent again for what seems like hours. And then, out of the darkness, a single voice rises for the second time. Again and again, silence, then song, then silence. The preceding silence only makes the songs more flavorful. I swallow the chicken, the dough, let the sweet raisins linger on my tongue, only richer after the savory filling.

Five months later, I still can't think about God, much less pray, except for when I go home for Thanksgiving and my mother says grace before dinner. There's something that aches inside me when I say Amen, maybe my empty stomach. Maybe the guilt of avoiding church for a decade, maybe knowing that I have thousands of sins that remain unconfessed. Maybe it's

because no matter how much I ignore it, I cannot force myself to believe in a Christian God, no matter how much I worship, I know that there is no old man who lives up in the sky.

After I fly back to school, my roommate and I carry Parsnip, our cat, out to her red 2005 Ford, drive the Goucher Loop at midnight, 30 mph over the speed limit, keeping a sharp eye out for deer and foxes lingering on the roads. Windows down, December air flowing through the open windows, one hand flung out the window and the other holding Parsnip in my lap. We scream the lyrics to "Red Wine Supernova" back and forth in our own form of sacred call and response.

"I like," at the top of my lungs, feeling the rasp of the notes I can't reach.

"I like," Ella screams back at me.

"What you like," I point at her, and she turns to me.

"What you like," she points back.

"Long hair," I drag my hands flat down my head.

"No bra," she playfully flicks her hands over her chest.

Together, "That's my type!" We laugh and turn to the windows again.

I can feel It in the wind, chilling my cheeks and tips of my fingers, see It in the reflections in the eyes of the young stags grazing on the Goucher lawns, hear It in the thumping bass that threatens to blow out the speakers in Ella's car. I can feel the millions of people who are worshiping with me, speaking in earnest to some abstract celestial being who I call God for the sake of ease. I can taste the raisins bursting, sweet and juicy on my tongue.

I think of the small girl in Mesopotamia, I think of the small girl in a Catholic church in Glendale, California, terrified of a plaster Jesus. I think of my aunties serving empanadas in the sunny courtyard, of Maggie's parents who let me lean on their knees and endured my terrible singing, of the thousands of people I have worshiped with, and the millions more who I have not worshiped with, and never will worship with. I think, *who are we worshiping? Who are we praying to?* I think, *it is each other*.

Commented [AM1]: This piece was fantastic and was a pleasure to copyedit—this is super polished to begin with. I couldn't find many places that needed changes. This ending rocks, by the way.