

Hosannah

Sheryl Cragun Dame

"I LOOKED IT UP LAST NIGHT." Elaine stopped conducting our choir practice to ask if we knew what *Hosannah* meant.

It was dark out, almost 10:00 p.m., and the canyon winds blew cold for October even on the Alpine bench. At the church, sixteen of us were practicing the "Hosannah Anthem," which we would sing for the dedication of the Mount Timpanogos Mormon temple in four days. It was our fourth practice that week, our seventh week of practices. Rick, my husband, had remained at the church after an evening of youth activities and made the practice on time. But I had arrived twenty-five minutes late after trying for an hour to calm our crying two-year-old, Madeleine after calling our babysitter, who had forgotten to come.

"Praise?" "Glory?" "Thank you?" A few choir members answered Elaine. Their sounds overlapped before sinking into the mustard-toned upholstery on the pews.

"That's how we seem to use it," said Elaine. "But it means *save now*."

Laurie Winn turned to me. She'd looked it up too, she said, and told me our Hosannah ritual—waving our white handkerchiefs while shouting *Hosannah!*—was like the people of Jerusalem waving palm fronds as Christ rode past them on a donkey, in that entrance we call triumphant, that spirited beginning of His atonement.

"*Save now*," Elaine said again. "Just think of that, singing it: *Save now. To God and the Lamb.*"

It soothed me to think of it, to imagine singing forte in our holy place, praying to God in harmony. *Please save me now. Please save us now. Please save our dead now. Please save us all. And, oh God and Christ, please save me. Please save me.*

I wanted to feel whole, to be made whole. The previous weeks and months had been like the hour before practice, an abnormal incessance of problems and commitments. I had started a new semester the same week choir practices had begun, taking a full class load while still trying to consider school a part-time commitment. Madeleine had developed a mystery illness, and for two weeks she had needed constant attention,

constant medication for pain. She slept little and couldn't eat, wavered between lethargic cries and irrational toddler screams. I had become a different person, arriving consistently late to my classes, forgetting doctors' appointments I'd rescheduled after forgetting them before, forgetting to pick up assigned readings on campus, and even forgetting, once Madeleine was well, to leave campus in time to pick her up from her caretaker. We hadn't vacuumed, hadn't cleaned our bathrooms for two months. We had just paid our bills a week late, and we suspected our checking account was below minimum balance.

It was no one dramatic thing, really. Just too many of those small things that ate little ragged-edged chunks out of me until I was consumed by insect bites. I could feel that slow onset of flu in my throat and head, that familiar soreness that increases incrementally over hours, a fatigue that made me yearn for soft places to lay my head.

But I had been enjoying the singing. Running from my car to class one day, I found myself humming "Sweet is the Work." Another day, I caught myself singing "Thanks be to God for His Eternal Mercies" as I lifted Madeleine to the counter top to zip up her red coat before rushing her next door to the sitter's. It was no Snow White thing, no whistle while you work, for even when singing I was tired and cranky, nervous and curt. But I thanked God for the chance to sing in the temple.

Sweet is the work, my God, my King,
To praise thy name, give thanks, and sing.

Elaine had us sing our four hymns again. As we put on our coats to leave, our organist Paul Jenks said we were to practice at the temple again in two more nights. The committee over the dedication music, he said, thought our last dress rehearsal had seemed "unstable."

Our rehearsals had seemed unstable to me, too, and to Rick, Laurie, and Elaine. Our full choir, as arranged by the dedication committee, included thirty-four of us from Alpine and twenty-six from another stake. Although Elaine conducted our Alpine rehearsals, our main conductor was Sister Morris from the other stake.

In our second combined practice, one week before our dress rehearsal, Sister Morris had lined us up in two rows, women in front, men in back, tallest in the middle and shortest on the ends. A few of us women spilled back onto the ends of the men's row, and that is where I stood, with Elaine on one side of me and Laurie on the other. We practiced marching to the back of the chapel, then to the front, and then we started singing.

Between verses, Sister Morris stopped us.

"OK," she said. "Now let's try the second verse." She was unfamiliar with the organ interludes. She mouthed words different from the printed text. She rarely cued clear cutoffs or showed us when to carry phrases

over without breathing. When she did cue us, she cued us in different spots than before.

For one hymn, the men were to sing the second verse, maybe in unison, maybe in harmony; Sister Morris hadn't decided. Our Alpine group had experimented and had liked unison better. But some men from the other stake had been practicing a harmony. At the end of practice, after someone asked Sister Morris to make a decision, two men suggested that the men could sing the verse in four-part harmony. The men mumbled back and forth.

"Just sing whatever part you want to sing," Sister Morris said. "I don't want anyone to have bad feelings this close to the dedication."

The men sang their verse, most of them in unison but a few trying to sing other parts. With so little balance, the harmonies sounded like background noise, so that even men singing the correct notes sounded as if they didn't know the music.

I don't know about the men, I thought, but this is giving *me* bad feelings. Was I the only one bothered by this indifference to quality, especially for such an important event? I felt angry that God's spirit would be used as an excuse for mediocrity, felt isolated wondering if I was the only one who felt this anger. Elaine, sitting beside me, had said nothing the entire practice. I chose my words and leaned toward her.

"I imagine it's hard to watch someone conduct the pieces so differently than you did," I whispered.

"The spirit can work miracles." She answered without looking at me. Her voice was flat. I felt embarrassed and looked back at my music.

We started practicing the Hosannah Anthem. In one vital, exposed section, Sister Morris consistently brought us in incorrectly. Two half-beats late. One-and-a-half beats late. One half-beat late. Then three half-beats early. I wanted us to sing our best for God and for the thousands of church members who would be watching the session. A conductor was supposed to know the music, I thought. She was supposed to be clear and decisive.

Maybe she was doing the best she could, I told myself. But I felt angry to have worked so hard on the music, then have the conductor keep us from performing well. The Spirit might work miracles, I thought, but it needed something to work with. But then, didn't I also believe the Spirit would move more freely through good feelings? I didn't want to feel antagonism in the temple.

"My problem," I told Rick after practice, "is that I'm a music snob. I have to get over this."

A week before the dedication, we had our first dress rehearsal in the temple. We met in the small Relief Society room of a nearby church and sat in our places in two long rows curved into circles to fit the room. Two men from the temple music committee looked us over.

"Is anyone worried about what they are wearing?" asked one committee man. I raised my hand with several other women. We had been told for weeks that the men should wear dark suits and the women conservative dresses, below the knee, with sleeves, in conservative colors. Sister Morris had warned us against red specifically, but we didn't know about other colors. Conservative meant Wall Street to me, and I had pictured my tailored navy blue dress, which hadn't fit me since my pregnancy. So I stood there in a creamy sage-green check, pleated to my ankles. It brought out my eyes.

"I don't see anyone who doesn't look all right," the other man said and showed us our seating chart. In the temple, he explained, we would sit in the small hallway where temple veil workers usually stand, facing the end of the hallway in twos like passengers in a narrow airplane. There would be a chart taped to the back of each chair, listing the order of the speakers and our songs. Ushers would signal us to stand at the right moment and we would walk into the celestial room in our rows, to stand behind the prophet and other general authorities. After each song, we would file back out to our little hallway, where we could watch the session on closed-circuit television.

"Remember you can't take purses with you into the temple," one of the committee men told us. "You can wear coats and carry umbrellas if you need to, and you can leave them under your chairs." No water bottles, he continued. They might spot and stain the carpet. No heels on women's shoes. No music or 3x5 note cards to remind us of our words and music. "Be sure to remember your white socks and white handkerchiefs," he said.

The committee men walked us across the street to the temple, through a back door and up a double flight of concrete steps. There were shoe coverings waiting for us on the landing. We pulled them on and went into the carpeted temple proper, then walked to the celestial room where we reassembled our rows. Brother and Sister Long, in charge of the choirs for the dedication, were there to listen to us.

"We're going to watch your singing," Brother Long said. "We'll be looking for all kinds of things."

The Longs sat down, and we sang through our hymns from memory. I discovered which musical lines, which words, I didn't know well. I could barely hear the men at all, and I saw a man near me just mouthing words, the wrong ones entirely. He smiled at me.

Brother Long stood up. We should make sure to look directly at Sister Morris the entire time, he said, even when we weren't singing. We should smile as we sang and smile when we didn't. The TV cameras would be scanning the choir, he said, and each one of our faces would fill the screen at some time. Arms straight by your sides, he said. Hands loose. Smile. Smile. Don't scratch your face. "Wait until you go back to your seat to pick that hair off your friend's shoulder," he joked to a so-

prano. His mild voice softened the long list of directions. It was a lot to remember, he said, but this was our offering to God.

Sister Long stood up. "It might seem like we are concerned about too much detail," she said. "But President Hinckley visited the temple two nights ago to inspect it before the dedication. He walked through the celestial room and looked at each piece of furniture and all the moldings. He just stood there and took it all in for a while. Finally he said, 'Yes. I think this is good enough for the Lord now.'"

Sister Long said our papery shoe coverings would rustle too much as we filed in and out of the celestial room. We would need to wear white socks over our street socks, clean as new, no holes or wear, men's socks with cuffs, women's anklets without. She had us practice marching out and in. In and out. Out and in, one row through one door, the other row through the opposite one. We crossed in the middle behind the prophet's chair, like a marching band. When Sister Morris put her hands down after a song, said Sister Long, we were to immediately start our march out, each member turning his or her shoulder as the person to the side started walking. A ripple just like the Cougarettes, said Brother Long, but no head flip.

We sang through our songs again. The Longs asked us to come back the next morning, Saturday, at 8:00.

That night, Rick sang at our piano until 11:00 p.m. I went over the words and notes in my head as I brushed my teeth and washed my face before bed, sang as I showered and dried my hair the next morning, my open *Choirbook* on the counter beside the bathroom sink.

"You men have been practicing," said Brother Long on Saturday morning, after we had sung our first hymn. "That's why we wanted you to come back this morning."

But Sister Morris continued to mouth some wrong words and cue our breathing inconsistently. When she missed the exposed Hosannah entrance entirely, some choir members came in as written in the music; others, hearing the singers who entered correctly, jumped in on the next beat. Then Sister Morris brought in those of us who had waited for her cue.

The next night, Sunday, Rick and I car-pooled with Laurie to a special practice. "The question we most need to ask," I said, "is the one we can't say. I mean, how do you say, 'Sister Morris, when you miss that entrance, do you want us to just count and come in where we're supposed to? Or do you want us to wait for your cue?'"

For a week I had tried to think *what's important is that we all sing together, balanced, together*. Elaine had said her bishop had asked the people in her ward to purify themselves. I had tried to purify myself too. Madeleine, who we'd left with a babysitter during all our practices, had been whining a lot, and I tried to keep my cool even when she wiggled

and squalled so much that it took me forty-five minutes to cut her toenails. I had asked God to help me forgive two men who had hurt my career four years before, to help me see them wholly, as human beings He loved. And I had asked God to help me see Sister Morris, to help me see her abilities and efforts. She was an enthusiastic conductor, I thought. I would remember the breathing and words on my own, I decided, and follow whatever Sister Morris did, whenever she did it.

Still the nature of the music and text made that Hosannah entrance essential.

"But you just can't ask that kind of thing," I said.

In the practice, though, another woman did. "Should we follow you, or come in when we're supposed to?"

"Follow me," said Sister Morris. "No matter what."

Near the end of the practice, choir members raised their hands and asked to review lines they were unsure of. We had missed the Hosannah entrance throughout our rehearsal, so I raised my hand and asked if we could practice it five times in a row.

"Oh, yeah," said Sister Morris. "Those first three pages are really hard. Let's sing through them again."

"No," choir members spoke out. "Let's go through that entrance again and again." By the third time, Sister Morris brought us in right. By the end, we all felt it together.

In one temple rehearsal, Sister Long had reminded us that some of us might get emotional during the dedication. Angels would probably join our singing, she said, and we might have trouble singing ourselves.

"But you have been asked specially to help the members at the dedication feel God's spirit and the importance of the day," she said. "You have a right to ask God to help you fill your calling, to help you bless them. He would want this. Pray throughout the week to be able to sing."

Rick and I drove to *Papa's* for a sandwich after that practice.

"Everyone always says that angels sing with the dedication choirs," I said as we drove. "And I guess I like to think that. I don't doubt that some people hear angels." I waited. "I can't say they don't."

But I was never one to hear or see angels. I grew up thinking everyone else did, from the stories I heard in church meetings and read in LDS books. Heavenly manifestations. God intervening in everyday life. I believed these things happened, but to other people, not me. Yet I had felt prophecy during my wedding to Rick, though I had expected nothing. After nearly breaking our second engagement, we instead said "yes" to the sealer; and there at the altar I felt light and heat and quickness, my head swinging through the sealing promises. I also sense God's tracings in new ideas and morning walks, Madeleine's smirk and Rick's hands. Still I do not have striking spiritual experiences. Maybe because I'm too

much a cynic, too analytical. Maybe because I'm unworthy. I've just never felt God was much aware of me. I have supposed it is part of my nature. My personality, my spirit. Belief and commitment over regular doubts. But not manifestations. No sense of God's love.

Rick put his hand on my knee. "Yeah." He smiled. "The angels will be there helping everyone but you."

We love thy house, O God, wherein thine honor dwells.
The joy of thine abode all earthly joy excels.

The night before we were to sing in the dedication, we returned to the temple for our last rehearsal. There had already been six days of dedication services, and when we entered, the security men looked at our tickets marked "choir" and had us pile our shoes near their desk. In every room we passed, we saw people cleaning—rubbing woodwork, reattaching the small white booties that covered chair feet, gathering loose papers, shampooing the carpet and setting industrial fans to dry it. We were wearing Sunday clothing, but the security men and many of the cleaners wore jeans. Two men wore tan janitor's jumpsuits. The clothing seemed strange to me at first, too informal for the temple until I watched them move. What do you wear, after all, for cleaning floors?

As we stood at the doors to the celestial room, watching another choir finish its practice, a man from the dedication committee walked in wearing faded jeans and a black polyester suit jacket. When the other choir sang the Hosannah Anthem, we sang "The Spirit of God" with them, as if we were the congregation. Then, as we lined up to practice, they moved to the congregation seats so they could sing it for us.

From where I stood between Laurie and Elaine, I could see Rick lined up with the men. Elaine had told us she would look at Sister Morris's contagious smile and smile back, integrate it into her own singing. Sister Morris put up her hands. I looked at her and smiled back, and we all sang together.

After the practice, after we all said "Amen" to a closing prayer, the committee man wearing jeans and the black jacket stood up. "Listen to us," he said. "We didn't even say an audible amen. Remember that the Hosannah shout is a *shout*. Everyone will be watching you at the front of the room. Be sure to shout."

He offered to show us a picture in the temple chapel of Christ riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. Rick, Laurie, and I stayed in the celestial room. We sat in the chairs for a while, talked with Elaine, the Longs, and some neighbors—temple workers who had walked into the celestial room to hear the choirs rehearse. Someone knocked over one of the cut flower arrangements by the podium, and green dust from the florist's block floated in a puddle on the cream-colored carpet. As Rick, Laurie,

and I left the celestial room, the temple matron rushed in to look at the spill. She sounded calm, so I stopped worrying about the carpet.

When we walked past the temple chapel, we heard the man in jeans talking and saw a small group of choir members from the side. "Just look at this guy," he said. The man was pointing to a picture I couldn't see. I didn't want a guide's interpretation of the picture, didn't want a pep tour. But when the group moved away, I moved closer to the picture.

A child ran alongside Christ, touching the donkey. A woman clapped. Two men grinned and talked to each other as He passed by. Other women spread cloths in front of the donkey's feet. Another man, tall and dark, led the donkey and looked at the people watching the procession. In one raised fist, he gripped a palm frond and punched into the air, shouting, guttural, from his diaphragm. "Hosannah! Yes!" Yes.

I walked back to Rick and Laurie. No one asked us to leave or pointed where we should go, and I imagined walking from room to room for hours. As we walked out, the cleaners in each room moved ritually, dusting and wiping, looking at us then moving back to their motifs in that peace of the accessible, that magnificence of the open.

On this day of joy and gladness,
 Lord, we praise thy holy name;
 In this sacred place of worship, we thy glories now proclaim!
 Alleluia, Alleluia. Bright and clear our voices ring,
 Singing songs of exultation to our Maker, Lord and King.

The day of the dedication, Rick and I woke early to shower and prepare our bodies, to go through all the physical rituals we might consider. We were to commune with the holy, to receive God and project spirit through our imperfect bodies. Rick had ordered a new white shirt, which he had picked up with my jumper from the cleaners the night before. I had washed our white handkerchiefs and my embroidered blouse, had bought new temple garments, new slip and bra and hose. Rick spot-cleaned his blue suit with a damp cloth, then starched and ironed my blouse and our handkerchiefs. I shaved my legs, took extra time styling my hair and applying the makeup I wear so infrequently, then helped Rick shave the back of his neck.

Did we have everything on our list? The clean white socks, handkerchiefs, our special parking permit, our entrance tickets marked "choir." I checked the pockets of my coat: hairbrush, throat lozenges. We drank milk and ate a few bites of bagel and pear, fed the cat, woke Madeleine. When my sister arrived to watch her, Rick grabbed our umbrella and we left in our car to pick up Laurie.

We met the rest of the choir in the church near the temple again, sat in our circular rows until everyone was there. We warmed up our voices by singing the Hosannah Anthem in the chapel. We put on our coats to walk

to the temple, then stood lined up in our rows again while two women escorts from the dedication committee gave us final instructions.

"The restrooms are down the hall," said one of our escorts. "You'll have about five minutes before we have to leave." Elaine went into the hallway and brushed her long hair, using the glass of a display case as a mirror. I asked around for chapstick, and a man I didn't know offered me his. I applied it with my finger, then passed it down to one of three men now waiting near the chapstick's owner. Our escorts led us in our two ordered rows, down the street and through the parking lots like a kindergarten class, each escort carrying a sign that read "Choir." The dark water on the road splashed up onto our dresses, and the wind flapped our hair around.

It was all very strange, this intense focus on the physical on a day that was to be holy. But the weather had changed; my skin and lips and throat were flaky and dry from the season's first furnace nights. The tendonitis in my heel had flared up badly, and I had to concentrate on walking regularly. I had started my period the night before and worried I would spot my clothing; I had developed a cold and a sore throat, and I wondered how I would sing without a drink. I had come to feel as the committee did: that every detail mattered.

When we arrived at our choir seats behind the celestial room, there were a pitcher of water and mints for our throats. Forty-five minutes early, we stretched, folded our coats to fit under our chairs, took off our shoes and put on our white socks. I smoothed my handkerchief on my lap with my fingers, folded two Kleenex into rectangles, and placed them below my chair before Elaine, Laurie, and I went to the restroom.

During the dedication, when we weren't singing, we sat unnaturally silent in our waiting area. After 1 1/2 hours, after singing three songs, I was thirsty and craved water. An usher walked by to check if each of us had a white handkerchief. We were to sing the Hosannah Anthem soon.

"So if I want a drink, I'd better get it now?" I whispered to the usher as he bent down to hear me. He nodded. But the water pitcher was at the other end of our long hallway, and no other choir members had walked back for a drink during the dedication. Though I knew a drink would help me sing better, I dared not disrupt the quiet with the noise of my slip brushing my legs, the water pouring into my cup, my swallowing.

A few minutes later, the usher stopped by my chair.

"Did you want a drink?" He leaned down to hand me a paper cup half full of water. I smiled at him and took the cup. I offered some to Elaine and Laurie, then lengthened each swallow I took myself.

When we stood to walk into the celestial room, we all shook our shoulders loose and stretched up our arms as if picking apples. The men adjusted their suit jackets and ties; we women pulled at the waistbands of our hose, straightened the straps of our slips.

As I turned to exit our hallway, one of the last in our row, I could still see the TV monitor at the end of the hall, could see on it the other choir members walking to their places behind the prophet. Our entrance had become one of our rites, for attention to detail can become a manifestation of the spiritual. We were supposed to use our voices—our human, needy bodies and our human, needy selves—to convey God's spirit to the congregation. And to make our bodies places where God and Christ could dwell and emanate from: we had to become temples ourselves.

Hosannah, Hosannah, Hosannah
To God and the Lamb.
Amen, Amen, Amen.

May our offering by him be accepted.
May our offering by him be accepted.
Amen, Amen.

Thanks be to God for his eternal mercies,
Thanks be to God for endless liberty.
Hosannah, Hosannah in the highest,
Hosannah in the highest, Amen and Amen.
We'll sing and we'll shout with the armies of Heaven,
Hosannah, Hosannah, to God and the Lamb.

I had not realized, until the moment Elder Packer demonstrated the Hosannah shout, that we would sing the words of the shout exactly. I stood behind him with the rest of the choir, then waved my handkerchief with the congregation throughout the temple. I swung my arm wide, moved my handkerchief in a broad circle, shouted. "Hosannah! Hosannah! Hosannah!"

When the congregation sat down, Sister Morris walked to her place in front of us, smiled wide, and nodded to Paul at the organ. He played the fanfare introduction and we began singing. "Hosannah. Hosannah. Hosannah." Then the ominous entrance. Normally crisp and exact, Paul hit an extra chord, but Sister Morris brought us in precisely. "To God and the Lamb." She lifted her eyebrows as if laughing at herself, moved her hands to maintain our volume. "Amen. Amen." Now soft. "Amen."

Earlier that morning, both Rick and Elaine had remarked how well our songs seemed to fit their places in the dedication. Sister Morris had matched each slot with just the musical mood, just the text needed to reflect the moment. As we sang, I thought of my late grandfather, a voice teacher and gifted baritone who would have watched me sing if he could. Elaine forgot a low interval jump. An alto in front of me tried to suppress one of those ticklish coughs that gets all the worse for being stifled. I forgot a variation in a line. But I didn't care; it did not matter. By

the end of our practicing, we had hoped most for balance between our voices, a blending of our individual sounds. And finally, it was the effort and movement I cared about.

I sang, having felt inadequate for months, unimportant to God for years. And as I sang, I prayed. *Hosannah, Hosannah. Save now, Lord. Forgive me and make me whole. Cleanse me, please. Save me now. To God and The Lamb. Amen. Amen. Amen.*

In spite of Sister Long's advice to pray to control our emotions, I had not worried much about weeping. I don't usually have trouble controlling my emotions, especially when singing. But as the congregation sang the second verse of "The Spirit of God" and, with the choir, I continued the Hosannah Anthem over and around them, I could not sing. And then I tried to control my weeping.

I tried to sing again, but could not sustain the pitch. Tried again, but sounded like a frog—thick-throated, flat, no tone. I stopped singing, breathed deeply, swallowed hard, tried again. Blinked and blinked my eyes, tried to smile. But I could not sing. I would sing the *Amen's* at the end, I thought, where the congregation would stop and the choir would continue. I hit the first note, but my voice cracked and I could not support it. Finally I stopped trying to sing and just stood, looking straight at Sister Morris, listening to Elaine finish the *Amen's* beside me.

When Sister Morris put her hands down, I bowed my head for the closing prayer and sobbed. I shook. I wiped my nose with my handkerchief and tried to stay quiet as Elaine reached her arm around my waist. I stretched back my fingers to touch hers and left my hand there until the prayer finished.

I did not want to talk to anyone, wanted no end to this feeling that saturated me until I could not hold it. And yet I knew I could not bear it, that feeling, for so long, for I was overwhelmed with both desire and exhaustion. My body would fall, I thought, my bones melt, to feel that without rest.

My voice may depend upon my body, but it moves through my soul. I sometimes hear undertones and overtones I can't anticipate, tones which resonate most deeply when my voice flows freely with the voices of others, as it did in the temple that day.

And now I sing God's praises, because in that moment of my human offering, expecting nothing, deserving nothing, I knew communion and grace.

Oh let glory to them in the highest be given
Henceforth and forever. Amen and amen.
Amen, Amen.