

A Joyful Noise

Psalms 96 and 150

Pendleton B. Peery

First Presbyterian Church, Charlotte NC

January 19, 2014

Praise the Lord!

Praise God in his sanctuary;

praise him in his mighty firmament!

Praise him for his mighty deeds;

praise him according to his surpassing greatness!

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 clanging cymbals;

praise him with loud clashing cymbals!

Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!

Praise the Lord!

In case there was any confusion, the 150th Psalm – the last one in the book – wants to make clear what our right response to God should be: praise.

Thirteen times in eight verses: praise, praise, praise the Lord!

I've been away during the past two weeks taking a class for my doctoral degree at Columbia Seminary in Decatur, GA. One of the rhythms of life at a seminary is a daily chapel service at 10:00. What that has meant for me these past two weeks is that between services here and services there, I have had the chance to worship...you guessed it...13 times. Praise, praise, praise the Lord!

It is not often that pastors get a chance to attend worship; to sit in the pew and enjoy the freedom of participating instead of leading. These past two weeks, as I settled into a daily routine as a pew-sitter, I began to notice some things about worship that I had forgotten now that I am so used to wearing a robe.

Here are a few examples: First, I noticed that not all prayers and sermons and liturgies are created equal. Sometimes they connect with you and move you into a more profound connection with God – other times they really don't! Secondly, I realized that if you show up to worship with your mind on something – a detail or a worry or something you are excited about doing a little bit later in the day – your mind tends to wander to that very thing...*even when the worship leader is praying or preaching!* (I know that doesn't happen here, but I noticed it when I was in Decatur). Third, I realized that when it comes time to read something "in unison" sometimes it's not – not at all "in unison," and that can sound (and feel) a little awkward.

But in all seriousness, by far the most refreshing re-discovery for me in my worship life these past two weeks has been to appreciate the power of congregational singing. That's what I cherish the most about my steady diet of worship these past two weeks – the number of times I got to sing with the congregation.

Singing a good hymn can redeem the most boring of sermons or tedious of prayers. When you are in church, you can be completely distracted by the things that await you when church is over, but when you stand up and open a hymnbook to sing you can't help but focus on giving God praise. Singing hymns accompanied by organ or piano (or any instruments, really) blends all of our arrhythmic tendencies and creates something beautiful.

Today is a significant for us as we dedicate a new hymnbook. This kind of thing doesn't happen too often in the church. We've had the blue hymnbooks for 23 years. Before that, we sang from the red hymnal for about 40 years. Well, red and blue have made purple! The new book has favorite hymns, wonderful new hymns, old hymns, choruses, service music. You name it...it's probably there.

The committee that helped put this book together calls it a family album for the people of God. I'm especially mindful – on a day like today – about the significance of singing from the same book of music. Consider the role that these hymns play in the way we move through the year, and what impact that has on our community.

The way the somber and haunting tune of “O Come, O Come Emmanuel” prepares us for coming of Christ during Advent.

Or how holding a lit candle in a dark room singing “Silent Night” ushers us into the magical feeling of Christmas.

How children fanning down the aisle waving palm branches and singing “All Glory Laud and Honor” transports us to the road that Jesus took into Jerusalem the week before he was crucified.

Or the brassy notes of “Jesus Christ is Risen Today” fills us with joy when we come to church on Easter.

When I think back on the most significant moments of my life, most of those memories are set to music.

“Singing Praise Ye the Lord, The Almighty” on the day of my wedding.

Or, “Amazing Grace” at a difficult funeral.

They Will Know That We Are Christians By Our Love around a bonfire at Camp Grier.

Hearing the choir sing “Child of Blessing, Child of Promise” as my family walked down the aisle for Liam’s baptism.

I know there are people among us – as there are in every church – who don’t like to sing. In my observation, people who don’t like to sing tend to take one of three strategies. Some folks stand and mouth the words. Others try to sing softly enough that the person in the pew in front of them won’t notice. Still more decide they are just going to stand and let the congregation sing for them!

I once asked a church member who chose this latter strategy why he chose not to sing. “They don’t let bullfrogs into church,” he said.

Well – we do let bullfrogs in church. In fact, we welcome them. In the Psalms, scripture bids us to make a joyful noise to the Lord. I’ve studied the biblical languages so I did a little research on this word “joyful.” Guess what – there is nothing about the word that suggests that joyful means “sonorous” or “pleasing to the ear.” Noise that is directed at God in praise is joyful no matter how it sounds.

One way we have chosen to mark today’s occasion is by asking your fellow members to write short reflections on their favorite hymns. It’s a wonderful idea and a meaningful read. I wrote about my grandmother, whom I have mentioned to you before, who was blind but who had memorized most the hymns in the old hymnbook. My grandfather also loved hymns. And he would throw his head back a little bit in order to sing as loud or louder than my grandmother. Where my grandmother had a voice worth listening to, my grandfather couldn’t carry a tune to

save his life. His rhythm was just awful. He didn't know a whole note from a quarter. But he taught me a lot about the value of a voice lifted in praise.

God is up to something when we join our voices, you see; something that we cannot access in any other way. John Bell – Scottish pastor and member of the Iona Community – writes about the power of congregational song. He makes five claims about what hymns do for those of us who sing them.

First, hymns literally shape the way we understand God. A sermon or a Sunday school class or even a Bible study might give you an insight into your faith – but ask yourself what language sticks with you when you speak of God? “Immortal, Invisible, God only Wise.” How do you teach your children that they belong to Christ? “Jesus Loves me this I know “

Hymns create and reflect our identity. We are Presbyterians. There's a reason we sing John Calvin's great hymn “I Greet Thee Who My Sure Redeemer Art” on the Sunday when we celebrate our Reformed heritage. It speaks to our particularity as people of God. If you have ever worshipped in another country you know that the hymns they sing are the threads that give their worship texture. As I reflect on my experience in worshipping with fellow sisters and brothers in Christ in Malawi, or Jamaica, or Mexico, or Ireland – I don't remember what the worship service looked like or what stood out about the sermon. I remember what it sounded like – and how that made me feel.

Singing gives us an ability to express what we cannot capture in words. What communicates more effectively, a lecture on the nature of hope or a rousing rendition of Our God, Our Help in Ages Past? How much better can we describe what it feels like to trust in God than to sing “How Firm a Foundation?” The gratitude we experience on account of salvation other than singing “A Mighty Fortress is Our God?”

Wrapping our words in music elevates us to a different plane – it helps us see God more clearly than a landscape limited by speech.

Singing hymns helps us remember our past. One of the ways this new hymnal is different than the previous edition is that it brings back some of the hymns from years gone by. “Rock of Ages” and “Just a Closer Walk with Thee” to name just a couple. Some people cheer for hymns like these, and they let their pastors know when we don't sing them enough. I don't think people love these hymns because they are afraid to sing new ones, I think they love them because they recollect a past that is important for us to honor and continue. The hymns of our forefathers and mothers give us access to a treasure of the language of our faith that should inform our present.

Lastly, singing hymns give us courage to face our future. Most hymns in this book are shaped around a promise: of a future not built with human hands. That's why

we sing at funerals – to remind us that death does not get the last word. It is why the civil rights movement had a soundtrack of spirituals – to claim a reality that had not yet come into view.

There is power in the songs that we sing together; a power that lives beyond the page; a power whose source is in the very heart of God.

One of my wells of deep gladness as a pastor is to be up here and watch you worship; to see how God’s word and God’s presence affect you. But my favorite thing is to watch you sing. I notice when you are especially connected to a hymn that is one of your favorites. I watch you – on occasion – throw your head back a little bit so you are that.much.louder.

Sometimes I see the words of a particular hymn catch you up short and cause you to weep. Or how a hymn triggers something in you that makes you squeeze the shoulder of the person sitting next to you in the pew. I’ve literally watched people who I know are locked in deep disagreement catch each other’s eye as they sing about forgiveness or the unity we have in Christ – in whom there is no east or west, north or south.

It is the Holy Spirit moving among us friends – through the gift of music.

I have my own little habit when I’m really getting into a hymn. When I am singing something that is particularly meaningful and familiar, I will simply shut the hymnbook and give myself over to the music.

My favorite hymn is one written by Charles Wesley, “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling.” When we sing it again, you’ll see me closing the book on the last verse to sing it by memory.

Finish then thy new creation, pure and spotless let us be, fix in us thy new salvation, perfectly restored in thee, changed from glory into glory till in heaven we take our place, till we cast our crowns before thee, lost in wonder, love and praise.

Lost in wonder, love, and praise. When our worship leads us to that place are we not doing exactly what it is that God created us to do?

For I have found that when we join our voices through song
We are no longer aware of the differences that divide our belief,
We are not beholden to the worries that consume our time,
We are not defined by our failures or by our sin,

Rather, we are caught up in the very presence of the Holy Trinity who, alone, is the audience of our worship.

We are lost in the joy of our salvation.

Praise the Lord!
Praise God in his sanctuary;
praise him in his mighty firmament!

Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!

Amen.