

The First Presbyterian Church  
Charlotte, North Carolina  
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## HAVE A CUPPA TEA

Psalm 98

The rain rode the wind down on Edinburgh's streets.

It was cold, dreary, dark and more than a little gloomy. As Jane and I wandered up and down Edinburgh's wet streets, the wind-driven rain drenched us. We returned each evening to our B&B room with wet feet, runny noses, red windblown faces, chapped hands and lips. And it was one of the most *enjoyable* times in our lives!

If you live in the Hill Country of central Texas, you are ready for cold and dreary weather almost anytime you are lucky enough to get it. Scotland was a welcomed break: brisk and cold rather than hot and humid. We loved it!

The woman who owned the B&B is the daughter of a retired minister of the Kirk of Scotland. She thought we would enjoy meeting another Presbyterian couple and she arranged an afternoon tea at her parents' flat. When we arrived at Fred and Liz Marshall's for a "cuppa tea," Liz apologized for the weather, saying, "I'm so sorry it is such a *dreich* day!"

"What kind of a day?" I asked. "*Dreich*," she said. "It's a Scottish word. It means a combination of nasty, dull, overcast, drizzly, cold, misty, bleak and miserable weather. At least four of those adjectives must apply before the weather can accurately be called truly dreich." It was a brand-new word for us; a new word for a new experience.

**There are times when we need new words or, as the Psalmist urges, a new song.**

The children of Israel gathered in the Temple and sang a new song which celebrated the experiences they had enjoyed of God's presence during the year. "Sing to the Lord a new song, for the Lord has done marvelous things."

You have a unique experience; a shift in relationships uncovers new depths of feeling, new levels of appreciation. And a new song, a new dimension of thanksgiving and praise, or new word is needed. The Psalmist is excited that God does not wind us up and set us spinning, but actively interacts with us. "The Lord remembers mercy and faithfulness to the house of Israel, and all the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God." The Lord God demonstrates steadfast love and faithfulness to God's children and the earth is filled, packed-up and pregnant, with God's glorious presence. "The Lord remembers mercy and faithfulness to the house of Israel, and all the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God."

To use John Milton's beautiful expression, there are times when we should be able to hear "the music of the spheres!"

I can still see one of my college professors, Dr. Cheek, stop right in the middle of quoting Milton's *Paradise Lost*. And could he quote it! He knew that majestic poem backwards and forwards by heart and head. His face would shine and his eyes would glaze over, and Dr. Cheek, in a quivering voice would say, "Stop! Can you hear it? Can you hear it? It's the music of the spheres!" And I am telling you, there were times when I could almost hear it, for I was convinced he heard the cosmic spheres making heavenly music!

Caught up in a similar swirl of praise and the joyful music of the spheres, the Psalmist exalts,

Let the sea roar, and all that fills it;  
the world and those who live in it.  
Let the floods clap their hands;  
let the hills sing together for joy  
at the presence of the Lord, for  
He is coming to judge the earth.  
He will judge the world with righteousness  
and the peoples with equity.

A new song is needed to express our sense of God's awareness and involvement with God's creation and creatures in both the "delight" and the "dreich" times of human existence. "O sing to the Lord a new song!"

And as you are probably aware, this psalm, this Hebrew hymn, is the First Testament text for Isaac Watt's hymn *Joy to the World!* It fittingly celebrates the arrival and advent of the coming of the Lord God Yahweh to rule and judge the world with truth and grace. And it boldly proclaims this infant to be the King of the world. "Joy to the world, the Lord has come!" and therefore, "O sing to the Lord a new song!"

**Jane and I have been tea lovers for a long time.** Scotland's dreich weather fit us to a t (ea)! And we became converts to the city of Edinburgh over a "cuppa" tea. But a new song, a new word, was needed for what I was experiencing; it was something conveyed by the tea and the hospitality but beyond and deeper than either. For it was not just the tea or the hospitality or the dreich weather. It was something else, something like the rain riding the wind and drenching us which always reminds me of baptism; something almost holy, sacred. A new word was needed. A new song would help.

Yet we often shy away from new experiences of grace primarily because we fail to recognize them as grace. The deep and abiding problem of a religious life is not intellectual belief or lack of belief in the reality of God. The sandy grit in the "milk and honey" of faith is our difficulty in sensing God's personal presence in our present moments here and now, then and there. We are more at home, as Presbyterians, with the Word of God than we are with an experience of God!

A University of Georgia co-ed – that is what they were called back in the dark old days of yesteryear – asked a guest speaker, Father Malcolm Boyd, if he ever had a religious experience. He replied, "Yes, as least three times a day – at breakfast, lunch and supper." I thought it was a

perfect response. He experienced the goodness of God's care in the common experience of "breaking bread" with others. And in some deeply profound way, every meal is a reminder of the meal Jesus had with his disciples, the most holy of communions. The extra-ordinary love of God happens in the midst of the very ordinary events of your life.

**As Jane and I enjoyed the "cuppa tea" with the Marshalls in Edinburgh, I knew their welcome of us was an expression of their hospitality. But more, it was also an expression of God's provisional and persistent grace.**

It was more than merely enjoying their company and crumpets. We had been put into touch with a new sister and brother in Christ. We were part of the "family of Christ" as it exists in Scotland and all over this whole blooming world. And it is not only enjoyable, but also essential to our living to find and to be found by the bits and pieces of Christ's Body in our so-called common and ordinary experiences. If we sit around waiting for a "mountain top experience" we may wait forever. We can, however, have an experience of God the next time somebody offers you a glass of cold water, "cuppa" tea or coffee, or a piece of bread and a glass of wine.

What you and I learn in church school in Bible study groups, what we thank God for in our services of corporate worship make us aware of the Lord's presence in our common ordinary days, in moments delightful or dreich. This has been a constant theme of mine while we have been together here at First Church Charlotte.

And that is – well, I am still searching for a word for it. And although I do not have a new word for it, I do experience it. And I can, at least, describe it. The experiences of God's presence happen, I am convinced to everyone. But knowing the source of those experiences is the key. We, as Christ's disciples, are attuned to the source – to God in Christ.

For instance, you are an old grandfather. You stand with the rest of the congregation as your granddaughter is about to be baptized. Your son and his wife look so proud. They have no idea yet what is ahead of them. As the pastor lifts the child and places water upon her head, you feel the tears of joy come as silent sobs of gratitude express praise for having lived long enough to see goodness pass from one generation to another. And that is – well, maybe "*Godifying*" is the word, the new word.

You move with your parents and little brother to a new state, a new city. It's hard to make friends, the right kind of friends anyway. But someone asks you to come to his or her church's youth fellowship. There you are affirmed, they call you when you skip and tell you they really missed you. You belong somewhere with people who care. And these "little things" are somehow "marvelous things" the Lord has done. It is God's improvisational grace all wrapped up in a simple style of awareness and reaching out. And it is "*Godifying*".

Or you are in a bad situation – a dreary and dreich time. You can certainly name your dreich time: a marriage that has drifted into tedium, a job pulled out from beneath you, a career that fizzled out, or anything else that tastes like ashes for breakfast. But finally you are out of it: and that's the best thing you can say at first; the divorce, the termination, the death, the retirement, over, done. And you are out of it. And the others – former spouse, deceased spouse, employee

or employer – all are adjusting and they can get along without you. And, better yet, you can get along without them. Slowly and quietly you come to a startling awareness that there is someone you can't see, but only sense, walking beside you and it's all going to work out somehow. And somehow a new path has opened through the forest of change. That is *Godifying*: a new song, a new step, a new direction, a new word.

**And on a dreich afternoon in Edinburg, Jesus said, "I'm glad you stopped by. Pull up a chair and have a cuppa tea.**

Amen.