

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost
Sunday, September 29, 2024**

**“Make a Joyful Noise”
Psalm 98**

The Rev. Dr. David Clark

The first verse of our psalm is like the whole psalm in miniature: it offers a call to praise God—and a reason why.

“O sing to the LORD a new song,
for he has done marvellous things” (v. 1).

It’s an invitation to praise that responds to the goodness and kindness of God. And that’s how this whole psalm works: the rhythm of this psalm is ‘praise God—for he has done this’; ‘praise God—and here’s why.’ God’s grace is prior; then comes our praise.

“O sing to the LORD a new song”; why?

Because “[h]is right hand and his holy arm
have gained him victory,” the psalmist says.

“The LORD has made known his victory;
he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations.

He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness
to the house of Israel.

All the ends of the earth have seen
the victory of our God” (vv. 1-3).

Why must a song of praise be sung? Because—the psalmist says—because God has
remembered God’s people Israel, lovingly and faithfully.

Then the psalm repeats this rhythm: invitation to praise, then reason for praise. And the second invitation to praise is something else! It’s far more grand and sweeping: the psalmist began by calling for “a new song,” yet the psalmist is no longer content with just one new song; now the psalmist wants “joyful noise” and “joyous song” from “all the earth.” Just one new song? No way; now the psalmist won’t settle for anything less than a global ensemble of lyres and trumpets and horns—the biggest of big bands:

“break forth into joyous song and sing praises,”
the psalmist says.

“Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre,
with the lyre and the sound of melody.

With trumpets and the sound of the horn
make a joyful noise before the King, the LORD” (vv. 4-6).

Then before we can catch our breath, the psalmist expands still more widely this invitation to praise: it started with “a new song,” then grew to a multitude of instruments in “all the earth”—but now the psalmist wants praise from nature itself!

“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” (vv. 7-9).

A human orchestra simply won't suffice; now the psalmist calls for the accompaniment of shouting oceans and clapping waters and singing hills. As one paraphrase of our psalm puts it: “Let the sea and its fish give a round of applause, with everything living on earth joining in. Let ocean breakers call out, ‘Encore!’ And mountains harmonize the finale” (Peterson).

And what comes next? It's the same rhythm: invitation to praise—then the reason why. Why must every instrument and every hill offer the music of praise? Because—the psalmist says—because God has promised to set this broken world right: “for [God] is coming to judge the earth,” the psalmist says. “He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity” (v. 9).

The psalmist declares that this world—where justice can so often seem gut-wrenchingly absent—that this whole world will be touched by the justice of God, by God who will “judge” (that is, bring justice) with “equity.” One scholar of the Psalms describes God's justice as “God restoring harmony to communities that are broken,” “restor[ing] the harmony and goodness God intended for creation” (Creach)—and I think we find that promise in our psalm.

So this psalm offers two invitations to praise—and two reasons why. The first invitation to praise originates in what God *has* done in the past:

“O sing to the LORD a new song,
for he *has done* marvellous things” (v. 1).

The second invitation to praise originates in what God *will* do in the future:

“Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth;
for he [...] *will* judge [...] the peoples with equity” (vv. 4, 9).

And notice—both times, praise to God originates in the grace of God. Praise here is a grateful response to what God has done or promises to do. For the psalmist, praise doesn't start with us; for the psalmist, praise originates in the glory and goodness and grace of God. God's kindness, God's love, God's compassion—these are prior and primary. And praise is our way to reflect back to God the goodness that God has shown to us.

You can think of it this way: praise is grace echoed—grace echoed back to God, whose grace always precedes our response of praise. God's grace resounds—and, in our small ways, we can echo back to God that grace through the music of praise.

This pulpit was made in 1900, when this Sanctuary was new. However, it wasn't always here. Originally the pulpit was right down there—between where the Communion Table and the organ are now. But then, when the organ was installed in 1926, the pulpit was moved to its

present location. Previously the choir had been behind the minister, so I can say that—here at New St. James—my predecessors and I have been “preaching to the choir” since 1926!

Now in late 1890s, when our congregation was leaving the old building and designing this new one, sound systems like we have today were obviously not available; back then, even the gramophone was brand-new technology. So how was the congregation able to hear the minister speaking from the pulpit? It turns out, our congregation had this Sanctuary designed to *resonate*. The curvature of this ceiling is such that the voice spoken or sung from that spot would resonate and amplify. We have here an architectural sound system!

The pulpit was later moved, and microphones were eventually installed, but the Sanctuary still resonates right from that very spot. So if you happen to find yourself at the church sometime, and maybe you’re here in the Sanctuary all alone or with a few others—try it out. Stand right in front of the Communion Table, face forward and up, and begin to sing—and you’ll hear your voice filling the room, resonating and echoing right back to you.

And I think this can help us understand what the psalmist is teaching us about praise; but for this to work, we’ve got to switch things around. For the psalmist, God’s grace is the voice singing from the centre—and our praise is the echo, the resonance that echoes back that grace with gratitude.

God sings first: God sings to us a song of mercy and forgiveness, a song of compassion and kindness, a song love and tenderness, a song of justice and restoration, a song of hope and new life... So as the church, what else can we do but respond? What else can we do but—just like this Sanctuary—echo back that song to God, to return with joy and gratitude some faint echo of the melody of grace that God first sang to us.

So what do we do? As people who have felt and known the grace of God, what else *can* we do? We sing. We gather here, Sunday after Sunday, and join our voices together to praise God and thereby echo back to God that song of grace. Like this Sanctuary, which was *designed to resonate*, we have been formed as a people of praise; we have been created such that, when we experience the grace of God, we feel somehow incomplete until we echo back to God the music of praise. Today God is singing to us that song of grace; let us therefore echo back to God that grace with praise. Amen.