

Making a Joyful Noise

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“Psalms for the Summer” – Palm 95

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Imagine a three-year-old at the swimming pool for the first time. She’s a little anxious. The water looks fun and inviting, but it seems so deep. Her father coaxes her, holding out his arms and saying, “You can trust me. I won’t drop you. The pool is a perfectly safe place for you to be.”

The fact of the matter is, though, the child will never know that if she doesn’t jump. If she is simply grabbed and carried into the pool, she will never make the choice, never exercise her own courage. She must take the leap of faith for herself.

God coaxes the equivalent of anxious three-year-olds on a regular basis. *You can resist Pharaoh. You can head out into the wilderness. You can stand up to Goliath. You can leave your fishing boats behind and come and follow. You can give away your possessions and join my ragtag band of believers.*

Closer to home, God came to a young girl named Jean Matz, who lived with her family in an upstairs apartment here in Wells, who didn’t even own a piano. Yet, in the fifth grade Jean became interested in taking piano lessons after going with a friend to a piano recital.

Jean eventually started taking lessons, practicing wherever she could, including at the local Kiwanis in downtown Wells. She practiced long and hard. She kept getting better and better. One day in her junior year, the regular organist at First Lutheran Church was going on a trip. She asked Jean to fill in for her and, after that, to play for worship when needed.

Do you hear what I’m saying? Somebody was holding out arms to Jean and saying: “You can trust me. I won’t drop you. The organ bench is a perfectly safe place for you to be.” In other words, God said jump and Jean said yes.

We’re in the middle of our sermon series – *Psalms for the Summer*. Psalm 95 is the focus for today. Our theme is “Making a Joyful Noise.” Psalm 95 contains a call to worship, or to be more precise, it has two calls to worship. “O come, let us sing to the Lord,” the psalmist beckons. The translation of the

Hebrew verb as “come” is a bit on the tame side. It’s more like, “Let us sing and shout for joy!” And to whom? “To the rock of our salvation.” To be honest, that spirited call might seem just beyond the comfort level of many of us shy Lutherans, but that’s the call.

Why are they singing and shouting? Because God – whose personal name in ancient Israel was Yahweh – is a great King above all gods. The psalmist isn’t necessarily claiming that there *are* other gods, as much as he’s acknowledging that there are often god-like figures and objects for people to worship. That was true in the ancient Near East. It’s still true for us today.

The psalmist states some reasons for worship: “God has given us a marvelous creation, fashioning the depths of the earth and the heights of the mountains, molding the sea and the dry land.” *Look around*, the psalmist is saying, *It’s amazing!*” Whatever the worship event to which they were called – perhaps pilgrims coming to the temple in Jerusalem – it was bound to be a glorious celebration.

Next comes the second call to worship. Picture the scene. The pilgrims are invited to gather first in the outer courtyard, and then to process into the sanctuary. “O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker.” The scene is analogous to an encounter with a human king, kneeling and bowing in homage. The congregation belongs to God, after all. God creates this people and leads them and provides for them and protects them. And the reason? “God is the shepherd, and they are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand.”

There were any number of worship celebrations in the Bible. Some are in the temple, but others far beyond. They often involve singing and shouting for joy. Noah celebrates when the rain stops and the sun comes back out and they can finally leave the ark. David celebrates as the Ark of the Covenant is brought to Jerusalem. The ark is their most sacred religious object, housing the Ten Commandments. A dad celebrates when his long-lost prodigal son finally returns home. The dad exclaims, “It’s like my boy was dead, and now he’s alive again. He was lost and now he is found.”

From the beginning of the biblical story, the faith of the people of Israel and the people of the church was a faith that was expressed in song. Many of those songs were included in the book of Psalms, the hymnbook of ancient Israel. Since this is our story too, **we are a people who sing our faith.** Even those of us

who can't sing very well are invited to join in. You see, when we sing, somehow the words have a way of getting from our heads to our hearts.

I've shared with some of you before that when I go to visit those in care facilities, especially those with cognitive decline, I often look for a chance to sing with them. I'm regularly amazed. Some of these folks have a hard time remembering what they had for lunch, but they can sing the words to "Jesus Loves Me," and maybe even the words to "Children of the Heavenly Father." No doubt, we are a people who sing our faith, and the words we sing have a way of getting from our heads into our hearts.

As a part of making a joyful noise, we are also encouraged to pray. As with singing, prayer shows up over and over in scripture. Moses stands before a burning bush and hears God speaking to him: "Take off your sandals, Moses, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." Daniel is locked in a den of lions, but he prays for help and God comes to the rescue. Paul writes: "Don't be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God."

Prayer was as common as breathing for God's people. The psalms were not only a hymnbook, they were also the prayerbook of ancient Israel and the early church. They were the prayers that God's people carried in their hearts. Since this is our story too, **we are inspired to be a people who pray our faith.**

Back to my visits at care facilities. I often share Psalm 23 or Psalm 27 or Psalm 121 to those that I'm seeing. You'd be surprised at how many are able to join me in saying those prayers. They don't ask permission. They simply start. Somewhere along the way, they've memorized them. And to this day, they carry them in their hearts.

Why is this important? Because we are often overwhelmed with the world in which we live. Our lives are filled up with texts and emails and smart phones and I-pads and good old-fashioned cable TV. We're continually distracted: *watch this, read that, check out this breaking news.* Just as often as not, however, these interruptions make us anxious.

In our 24-hour world, what we really need is to practice twenty-four-hour-a-day access to God. Prayer is meant to be that. Just as Pavlov's dogs became conditioned to salivate for dinner every time they heard the bell, we can use

the anxiety we feel as a cue to pray. Don't worry about what's happening around you. Simply direct your anxiety to God.

Psalm 95 calls us to make a joyful noise, whether Jean Carlson is playing the organ, or Connie Stenzel, or someone else. We are called to be a people who sing our faith by shouting for joy. We are called to be a people who pray our faith by turning toward God anytime we feel anxious.

An inspiration for this comes from one of the most beautiful passages in scripture. It's found in Isaiah 43. God is speaking to his people: "I have called you by name," God say, "You are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; and when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. For I am the Lord your God, the holy One of Israel, your Savior....Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you."

Friends, *you are the beloved of God*. Why not write down these words from Isaiah 43 and carry them with you? What more do you need to achieve or prove or acquire? *You are the beloved of God*. Who else do you need to impress? What other ladder do you need to climb? *You are the beloved of God*. What are you going to add to your resume that is going to top that?

Do you hear what I'm saying? The God who loves you is greater than you can imagine. Picture this God holding out his arms to you and coaxing you to worship him, to trust him, and to not be afraid to jump. You may not be able to see him or hear him, but he's near. He's watching. And he's ever ready to reassure you: "Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you." Amen.