

A New Song

John 15:1-8

May 5, 2024

Psalm 98

O sing to the LORD a new song,
for God has done marvelous things.
God's right hand and God's holy arm have gotten the victory.
The LORD has made known the victory;
God has revealed this vindication
in the sight of the nations.

God has remembered divine steadfast love
and faithfulness to the house of Israel.
All the ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God.
Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth;
break forth into joyous song and sing praises.
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.

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 God is coming to judge the earth.

God will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with equity.

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Rev. Michael Catanzaro

I.

This morning I would like to invite all of you to join me in purposeful trespass, that we might be complicit, together, in stepping over that dividing line between church and state. Though I rarely do so, on this particular Sunday I am going to allow nationalism, patriotism and politics to not only *creep* into the sermon, but, moreover, to unapologetically *thrust* them onto center stage. This is a departure from our church's norms, and this preacher's regular practice. From the congregation's perspective, somewhere along the line of the past 25 years, all of you have become accustomed to having your social and political views, be they conservative, moderate or liberal, respected as your personal right, and honored as the purview of your own responsibility.

II.

That said, it would be a terrible waste of all of our time to come to church if such views were not challenged, on occasion, or, at the very least, reframed in new ways as indicated by scripture. Unlike so many churches, ours is not a haven for one side of an argument, one perspective on an issue, or one particular party over another. We don't just sing the melody line with a goal of greater volume. Instead, we strive for multi-part harmony, endeavoring to attune many voices into a complex, nuanced, and shared song. We understand the power of subtly, are not afraid to change tempo, and appreciate the value to be found in the silence in-between the notes. Rather than seeking to be all of *one* kind, we are a church in search of a one of *every* kind. Less a one size fits all, and more a canopy extending to cover every shape, size, and ilk. Not the many striving to be one, but the one striving to be many.

III.

From the preacher's perspective, this suits me just fine. Tedium is always my greatest worry, and seldom have I been bored with you over the span of the last quarter century; anything but. More importantly, though, we are a

church operating with the onus of preparing for the kingdom of God as well as heralding its arrival and, finally, actually ushering it in. It is an unparalleled challenge which is seldom furthered through only one medium or modality, but requires an array of minds working not from answers, but questions.

So, I am both engaged by the opportunity to pose these questions, while, at the same time, believe such questions, hard questions, to be the sole means of meeting the demands of the kingdom of God which have been placed upon us. Which brings us to today's question: "What is the new song we to sing to God, and what is the marvelous thing which prompts us to sing it?"

IV.

Rarely do I yield to the temptation to preach from the Psalms. They are beautiful, to be sure; wonderfully illustrative, with remarkable images and bold ideas. However, in truth, preaching from a Psalm is like preaching from a Bob Dylan song, only doing so thousands of years after it was written.

*Johnny's in the basement
Mixing up the medicine
I'm on the pavement
Thinking about the government
The man in the trench coat
Badge out, laid off
Says he's got a bad cough
Wants to get it paid off
Look out kid
It's somethin' you did
God knows when
But you're doing it again
You better duck down the alley way
Lookin' for a new friend
A man in the coonskin cap, in the pig pen
Wants eleven dollar bills, you only got ten*

Certainly there is some kind of theological message in there, what it is, though, is hard to say.

V.

One of the keys, then, to understanding any scripture passage is understanding the context in which it was written, the purpose for its writing, and the audience to whom it is addressed. This is uniquely the case for the Old Testament, and for the Psalms in specific.

Our sermon text for today, Psalm 98, is an excellent example. More than just an intersection of church and state, it represents a portion of a very long stretch of highway which has only very recently diverged into two distinct and, now, very different roads. It is inherently problematic for us, from our modern and American perspective to imagine not just a world where church and state merge, but where there is no distinction at all between the two. Where geopolitical realities and events are directly tied to religious truths. Where nationalism is the seed of faith and patriotism its spiritual practice.

VI.

Psalm 98, then, might best be compared to our own country's anthem, recounting military victory as proof of the virtue of foundational ideals:

*O say does that star-spangled banner yet wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave*

in combination with our belief in divine national sanction proclaimed in these familiar and prayerful lyrics:

*God bless America, land that I love. Stand beside her and guide her
Through the night with the light from above*

Psalm 98 is an ode not just to nationalism but to the continued existence of that nation. As such, it is a call to joy; an invitation to use not just words of praise, but instruments of lyre and trumpet, to rejoice in response to what God has done for the nation. Not just as divine geo-political favor for one nation over another, but as part of God's plan for creation which hears the hills singing and seas roaring in accord with such providence fulfilled.

VII.

There is some kind of theological message in there, what it is for us sitting here today, though, is hard to say. Certainly, as Americans, we believe ourselves to be heirs to such a "favored nation" status, that our's is a land, a people and government of God's own making and purposeful design; that in a way similar to Israel, we are uniquely blessed by God. Unfortunately, though, the *responsibility* which comes with such a blessing is often conveniently forgotten or purposefully ignored.

And, as found in Israel's history, we have a long tradition in this country of people using a prophetic voice to warn that the nation's fate is tied to the nation's actions. Unfortunately, such modern proclamations often have more to do with partisan social issues than the ancient proclamations of Amos,

Hosea, Micah, Isaiah and Jeremiah, all of whom called for justice to roll down like water in the way the poor, citizen and foreigner alike, are treated; and, how we care for the least among us, warning of the consequences for not doing so.

VIII.

Psalm 98 is, then, a quandary for us. In understanding the context for its writing we labor to draw modern parallels, doing so with appropriate caution. We return, then, to the original question posed: “What is the new song we to sing to God, and what is the marvelous thing which prompts us to sing it?”

Given what is currently happening in our world, today’s text opens wide the door to address issues such as white, Christian nationalism, the barbaric attack on Israel by Hamas and Israel’s brutal and on-going response, the reaction of student demonstrations now happening on certain college campuses from coast to coast, and the run-up to the fall presidential election with our nation not just polarized but bitterly divided.

At the heart of each of these issues is the profound contrast between competing visions for one’s nation over and against any other. Rather than get down into such weeds, however, I believe our energies are better spent by gaining some altitude. One of the ways we can understand the dynamics at work in these matters, is to recognize these issues for what they are: that is, as noise making.

IX.

In an instance of happenstance, or divine intervention (depending on how one’s chooses to view it) I had the opportunity to chat this week with our own JJ Jockel. He showed me a few photos of him as a quiet but brash, first year student at SLU attending a planning meeting with the likes of Duane Dittman (head of Development) and Dr. Frank Piskor (beloved former President) both of whom were members of our congregation. This also caused me to remember a conversation with JJ in which he recounted crowds of students gathered in the Park protesting the war in Vietnam as it neared its end.

X.

This week I have also had the great pleasure of hosting my old and dear friend of 35 yrs., Mark Adams, who came all the way from Minnesota to visit me and see me in what he terms, “my own environment”; both at home and

also in the church. Mark has long received the weekly sermon and our church's monthly newsletter, so he is well-versed in the going-ons here on the Park. Suffice to say, he knows much more about *you* than you do about him. However, this morning during coffee hour you have the opportunity to balance the scales as, I am sure, he would be *delighted* to chat with any of you about his life as a woods-hippie, horse-logger, homesteader, master practitioner of the "weird," and metaphysical adventurer.

As a bonus, he certainly is in a position to tell you to a story or two about your pastor that few have ever heard (or can scarcely imagine) such as Thursday night showers, potluck and music jam in the old Hovland school house into which he moved after his house blew up, and the time we hit the deer with my VW bus the night before my first wedding (he wanted to field dress it on the roadside, throw it in the bus, and hang it in the shower back at the motel; we eventually decided that, perhaps, that was *not* such a great idea). Suffice to say, Mark has played a profound role in my life as friend, mentor and colleague, and I am deeply grateful to him for all the gifts, and good times, he has provided.

XI.

With yesterday being the 55 year anniversary of the shooting of students at Kent State, and with his permission, I will share with you that Mark was a first year student at Kent State at that time, and on his way to lunch from Geography class the day of the shooting; helping to tend to the dead, dying and wounded in its aftermath. This past Friday evening, he shared with me his recollections of that day, and we spoke at length about the parallels to what is happening now in our nation and across the world.

Though one might rightly question the validity of comparing "the apple of then," to "the orange of now," I think we all can agree that at certain times in history righteous noise is called for, if not demanded. Whether from a sense of moral outrage, deep seated sadness, or profound loss folks are moved to say, "enough is enough" and they proceed to MAKE SOME NOISE.

XII.

I would assert to you, however, that one lesson of the social unrest and political protests of the 1960s and 70s has to teach us here amid our current societal turmoil, is that hoisting a picket sign, barricading a building, or

taking to the streets, park, or quad is rarely enough to move the needle. Changing the course of history requires more than the actions of a few; regardless of how vocal or determined. Instead, it is almost always the groundswell of support coming from *all* corners of the country, community or church which redirects the collective energy and reshapes our common future.

It would be a mistake, however, to believe that change only ever happens when the pot boils over from the heat of righteous noise. The truth is, most change takes place through the process of “low and slow,” as in smoking meats or preparing dinners in a crock pot, using the steady application of a noise which is *joyous* in nature.

XIII.

Here, then, is where we, as the Church, can excel and *must* excel. When we come to accept not just the possibility, but the *inevitability* of a new song that God would have us sing, written on a cosmic scale in which evil will not triumph over good, we give birth to hope. When we fathom the depths of our gratitude for a God who blesses us so profoundly such as to stir our soul and spark our spirit, we give rise to a love for one another just as God has loved us. When we rely on our belief in that God to intervene not only in our own lives, but in the affairs of nations and their people, we begin to find peace. Through these we come to accept the only real criteria for *any* new song God would have us sing is that it merely be born of the joy God has *for* us now coming alive *in* us; regardless of the form of noise such a song may take.

XIV.

So, what is the new song we to sing to God? It is whatever song that *you* hear which Gods places upon *your* heart to sing, in any form of beauty and harmony that can be managed and mustered. And, what is the marvelous thing which prompts us to sing it? That each of us, in our own wonderfully unique way, is part of God’s plan for the world through the on-going legacy of this church, and our involvement in it. That, together, we are a song shared, complex and nuanced; endeavoring to attune ourselves to the Gospel, and striving for the justice which harmony requires; and, making a *whole bunch* of joyful noise along the way.

Look out kids, it’s somethin’ we did.

God knows when, but we’re doing it again. Amen.