Bursting into Jubilant Song

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church
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Psalm 98

Music and singing have always been an important part of the church. Music has always been part of the way we Christians express our faith. Whether we do it with choirs and organs or with guitars and drums, when we worship there is something in us that wants to sing. And throughout church history prophets and theologians have recognized the importance of music in the praise of God. Martin Luther for instance. Here's something Luther once wrote: *Music is God's product and His gift; we marvel when we hear music in which one voice sings a simple melody, while three, four, or five other voices play and trip lustily around the voice that sings its simple melody and adorn this simple melody wonderfully with artistic musical effects…A person who gives this [beauty] some thought and yet does not regard [music] as a marvelous creation of God, must be a clodhopper indeed and does not deserve to be called a human being; he should be permitted to hear nothing but the braying of [donkeys] and the grunting of hogs*. Typical Luther. He was not one to pull punches.

I enjoy Luther's assessment of the place of music in worship, but I prefer the words of the psalmist in Psalm 98. For one thing Psalm 98 is a little more positive than Martin. No one gets called a clodhopper. And more importantly, Psalm 98 does a really nice job of helping us understand why God intends music and worship to go together. That's where I want to spend my time tonight. I want to reflect on the gift and call of worship music. I want to take a closer look at this beautiful gift God has given us and why the Bible keeps calling us to "Sing to the Lord a new song." I think there are three main purposes for worship music suggested by Psalm 98. I will go through them one by one. Two of these purposes are clearly stated; one of them is suggested.

We find the first clearly stated purpose of church music in verse one. "*Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things; his right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him*." The word 'for' is kind of a giveaway here. It's the Hebrew word Ki, and when you see it used like this it indicates purpose. *Sing to the Lord a new song*…Why? *Because he has done marvelous things*; *his right hand and holy arm have worked salvation for him.* God gives us the gift of church music so that we can declare and remember the marvelous things he has done, so that we can remember his faithfulness in the past. When God does something wonderful, when he delivers, when he heals, when he forgives, when we experience one of those moments where the presence of God is clear and the grace of God is flowing, we ought to sing about that. This isn't just what Psalm 98 calls people to do; throughout the Bible this is what God's people actually do. God saves; they sing. Here are just a few examples:

- Exodus 15: Moses and the Israelites are saved from Pharaoh. God parts the waters of the Red Sea and they walk through. What happens after that? Miriam breaks out the tambourines and they sing a new song.
- Judges 5: Deborah and Barak are miraculously delivered from the oppression of the Canaanites. Jael does her tent peg thing with Sisera and they are delivered. Deborah writes a new song and they all sing.

- 1 Samuel 2: Hannah's prayers are answered and she has a child after years of hoping. She rejoices in God's faithfulness, and what is the form of her rejoicing? A song. The song of Hannah.
- After his son is born Zechariah is finally able to speak again. The first thing out of his mouth is new song of praise. The song of Zechariah.
- Luke 1. The Virgin Mary hears the promise that her child will bring Salvation. She sings a new song. The song of Mary: *The Magnificat*.
- Simeon finally gets to see the Christ child as God had promised. What does Simeon do? He sings a song about God's marvelous deeds: "Lord, now let your servant depart in peace for my eyes have seen your salvation. A light for the Gentiles and glory for your people Israel."

The pattern is clear: God does a marvelous thing, and the people sing a new song. They sing their song for us so that in our hard times, in our lean times, in our fearful times, we will remember that God is faithful. And these songs help us remember because, like all great music, they open us up and they allow the Holy Spirit to drive these stories of faithfulness deep into our hearts. If I were to say: "Only a boy named David, only a little sling"…I know that many of you would know exactly what comes next. That song is deep in your head. If I would say "Jesus loves me this I know"…you could all finish the song. That song is really lodged in your head. If I were to say "When peace like a river attendeth my way, though sorrows like sea billows roll"…you would have the rest of that verse right there in your head. Right there in your heart.

That last one is interesting. It reminds us that, as Psalm 98 says, it is really important to keep writing new songs which celebrate God's marvelous deeds. Do you know the story of *When Peace like a River*? It was written by Horatio Spafford. In 1873 Spafford and his family were scheduled to travel from the US to Europe on the French ship the *Ville du Havre*. Spafford got caught up in some business so he sent his wife and children ahead of him. He planned to come on a later vessel. During its crossing the *Ville Du Havre* collided with another ship and it sank in only 12 minutes. Spafford's wife was saved, but all his children perished. Full of sorrow, Spafford got on a ship to meet his grieving wife. On the voyage, near the spot in the Atlantic where his children had died, he wrote '*When Peace Like a River*.' Even though his sorrows were rolling like sea billows, through his tears, he was able to say "It is well with my soul." Horatio Spafford answered the call of Psalm 98:1. He wrote a new song about how God calmed his broken soul. Has that new song helped people on their journey? Yes, yes it has. Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things. God gives us the gift of church music as a way to remember his presence and faithfulness in the past.

There is a second 'Ki' clause in this Psalm. There is a second place where the word 'for' is used to explain why we sing. Verse 9. "*Let them sing before the Lord for he comes to judge the earth*." The Psalmist wants us to sing songs that celebrate the coming judgment of God! Now I know that it might not be immediately clear to you why the fact that God is coming to judge us would be a cause for celebration. Most of us don't like being judged. The Psalmist has a different view of judgement. For the psalmist God's coming judgment will be like the coming of an exterminator to a cockroach-infested house. If your home is infested with cockroaches, the coming of the exterminator is something to celebrate. You might even whistle a happy tune on the day he arrives! That's how the psalmist sees the coming of the judge. Evil will be flushed from every dark corner of my heart. Evil will be flushed form every dark corner of your heart. Evil will be flushed from every corner of the world and everything will be made new. "*He will judge the world in righteousness and the people with equity.* "So, in the first part of the Psalm called believers sing about God's marvelous deeds in the past. Now we are called to sing our

hopes for the future. Now we are called to sing about what God has promised to do, what God will do for this world.

We don't know for sure when Psalm 98 was written, but most scholars think it was written right about the time Israel was coming out of their exile in Babylon and back into Jerusalem after their 70 years of captivity. Now, what kind of state were the people in at that point? They were happy to be coming home, but they were weak! They were poor. Their city was in ruins. Their economy was in shambles. And yet you'd never know it from this song. This Psalm is joyful. This Psalm is confident in God's rule. But that hope does not come from the circumstances around them – there are still cockroaches everywhere - this hope comes from the future. This hope comes from a deep-rooted assurance of the salvation and justice that God will surely bring. It is so important that we sing these songs of God's future, because we are people who live by faith and not by sight. Our present circumstances can be pretty cockroach-infested too. If all we ever fix our eyes on is the dangers, toils and snares that are around us, we will never stop worrying. Fear and anger will become our driving passions. But while we certainly notice our present problems and we work to fix them, our hope, our strength, our passion comes from the hope we have in Jesus Christ our Lord. Jesus who died. Jesus who rose. Jesus who will come again in glory to make all things new. "*He will judge the world in righteousness and the people with equity!* When we stand in the middle of the cockroaches and sing these songs of hope it's like we are drinking from the stream of living water that flows from the throne of Jesus in the New Jerusalem.

This too is what Christians have always done! This is what Paul and Silas did in the Philippian jail! In the dark, in chains, they sang a joyful song of hope. This is what the African-American slaves were doing when they wrote the first spirituals. Their lives were a living nightmare but they sang *Swing Low Sweet Chariot* and *Go Down Moses*. These songs set their hearts and minds on Jesus, who will judge the world in righteousness and the people with equity. This is what we all do when we come to church with our hearts weighed down with all the stuff and yet we stand up and sing *Jerusalem the Golden*, or *Love Divine, all Loves Excelling* or *Precious Lord*. God gives us church music as a source of living water, as a way to sing our future hope.

One more point. This one is not explicitly stated with a 'for' clause; this one is more implied by the text. The Psalm calls us to sing of God's marvelous deeds in the past. The Psalmist calls us to sing of our hopes for the future, and throughout the psalm there is this sense that when we do, our song grows to encompass all creation. We sing and the sea resounds and the rivers start clapping. We sing and pretty soon the earth and all who live in it (verse 7) are tapping their feet and leaning in and wondering about this hopeful song we are singing. Our church music is a kind of universal language. So our songs can be a doorway through which the whole world begins to hear the salvation of our God. A skeptic who would never agree to come to church with you might agree to come to a concert of St Matthew's Passion. A person who never thinks much about God might come to a U2 concert and suddenly find themselves singing along to Psalm 40 with Bono and the rest of the crew. The songs we sing proclaim God's universal salvation to the world. Remember what happened when Paul and Silas sang their midnight songs in the Philippian jail. The rest of the prisoners were listening.

And sometimes when one of the prisoners hears, everything changes. In her book *Travelling Mercies*, Anne Lamott describes how she came to faith in Jesus. Her life was severely messed up. She was already a writer, but she was also a drunk and a drug addict who had been through a series of destructive relationships. She was as lost as a human being can get in this

world without being dead. She describes how on Sunday mornings, when she was hung over from whiskey and cocaine, she used to go down to a flea market near her house to browse and walk off the misery. Across the road from the flea market there was an old, inner city, mostly black, Presbyterian Church. While she was browsing she would hear gospel music coming through the open doors of the church. She knew some old gospel songs and so she found herself drawn up to the doors of the church where she would stand in the doorway, listen to the singing and even sing along. Week after week she would stand at the back of the sanctuary and sing. But she would always leave before the sermon which bored her (people are all the same). Everything about the church intrigued her, but it was the music that split her wide open. *One week I went to church, I was so hung over I couldn't stand up for the songs, But the last song was so deep and raw and pure that I could not escape. It was as if the people were singing in between the notes, weeping and joyful at the same time, and I felt like their voices or something was rocking me in its bosom, holding me like a scared kid, and I opened up to that feeling, and it washed over me.* From that day, Anne Lamott showed up in church and sat down with the congregation for the whole service including the sermon. In the words of our Psalm, through the music, the Lord had made his salvation known. So *Shout for Joy to the Lord all the earth. Burst into jubilant song. For he has done marvelous things. All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God*.

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