

Psalm 100 June 2020

The wonderful author Anne Lamott, who is also a devout Christian, has written about the value of participating in worship. In one article on this topic, she wrote that even when she went reluctantly to church, she found that God and Christian community had a way of outwitting her sorrow or crankiness and blessing her with grace, in spite of herself. Of course, “attending” church, participating in worship, has looked different these past few months. Several have commented to me that they now worship in bed in pajamas or while sitting on the deck with a cup of coffee. Certainly we have had to be flexible in how worship is created and experienced. But even so, I would have to agree with Anne Lamott; regardless of how I feel prior to worshipping, even worshipping online, I almost invariably feel more inspired and uplifted by the time worship ends. I am *especially* grateful for the opportunity to worship and for this community of worship in the midst of all that is happening in our state, nation, and world right now. With significant and tragic and potentially hopeful things happening everywhere in relation to both the pandemic and racial injustice, I remain grateful to have the opportunity to set all of that within the perspective of God’s goodness, love, and redemption. I do believe that, in all circumstances, worship is good for us, in body, mind, and soul. And for the next several weeks, we will be focusing on the worship book of the ancient Hebrews, the psalms. The psalms or psalter, were the equivalent of our red ELW hymnals for the people of the Old Testament. Their world also experienced pandemics, violence, racism, and economic upheaval. Yet through it all, they continued to worship, and they left a legacy for the entire world of these psalms, these ancient hymns---some joyful, some laments, some cries for help. This morning our lectionary

psalm is Psalm 100, a psalm of praise that upholds the value of worship. And I would venture to say that we feel right at home with this psalm as soon as we read the first line.

“Make a joyful noise to the Lord”, we read. We are very successful in that undertaking. Not only is our choir named Joyful Noise, but the entire congregation qualifies in the joyful noise category. You may recall, if you were a member here maybe 10 or so years ago, that there was a time when we tried to subdue that joyful noise just a bit. Some felt that it would be reverent and appropriate for there to be prayerful silence prior to worship beginning and while the prelude music was being played. We put notes in the bulletin, asking people to keep quiet. I made announcements about it. I tried coming out as the prelude began and kneeling silently at the altar to encourage this attitude. And we failed miserably. There is certainly value in reverent silence, but in terms of our coming together, we are just much more of a joyful noise kind of gathering. In fact, a number of new members have commented that one of the things that drew them here was that the moment they entered the building, there was a happy, warm feeling of interaction. We are a joyfully noisy congregation! I have compared us previously, I think, to a Golden Retriever kind of group, exuberantly welcoming. Goldens may have their downsides, but a lot of people like Golden Retrievers, and as it happens, we have this affirmation of our natural congregational personality right here in the first verse of Psalm 100. “Make a joyful noise to the Lord”. We do. This verse may seem a little counter cultural, if we may associate the same tendency to shush people in church as we do in libraries or concert halls or school classrooms. But the fact is, sometimes joyful noise is the right thing to make. And it says so right here in Psalm 100!

It's interesting to recognize that in the Hebrew language, there are a number of verbs at play throughout this psalm that are in the *imperative* form. English doesn't so much have such distinctions in our verb forms, but Hebrew, like many other languages does. Imperative verbs are what they sound like they would be---they are imperatives; commands. In this psalm we find the following imperative verbs, or commands: Make a joyful noise, worship, enter, praise, bless. These aren't just gentle suggestions or offered up as possible options---we are *commanded* to do these things. This psalm was likely used by pilgrims processing through the countryside up through the city, climbing the hill towards the magnificent temple, entering the gates and moving through the courts. This isn't a sedentary psalm; it's faith and praise in motion. This is active, energetic praise. And as such, it's worship that involves our whole selves, our bodies as well as our spirits. "Know that the Lord is God", we read, and that verb "Know" is also an imperative, a command. More than that, the verb "to know" is the same verb used to indicate intimate physical relationships between people. So this knowledge of God is not just an intellectual knowing, some kind of mental assent. No, it's an *embodied* knowing, a relationship that you can feel in your heart when you cry or in the joy of your movement when you go hiking. And when you think about it, our worship and praise generally have involved talking, singing, standing, kneeling, coming forward to the altar, and so on. Worship and praise aren't *passive*; they're active, vigorous, and involve all of our selves. And worship and praise are something we are commanded to do, but also something we *need* to do, even or especially in difficult times such as those we are experiencing.

Because, consider this: we continue to this day to read and sing out of the Hebrew psalter, songs as old as 3000 years. Surely, the fact that these psalms of praise continue to be

used all these centuries and millennium later is testimony not only to their inspired Scriptural authority and quality, but to the powerful and human need we have to praise God. This is a need that spans human history. Contemporary writer Mark van Doren asks us the following, vital question: “The God of the galaxies, how can we praise him? For so we must, or we will wither.” How *can* we praise this God of the galaxies? We *need* to do so, for if we don’t, “our spirits will wither”. Praising God is a *human need*, it’s not just something we do for God’s sake and because God commands it; we do it to keep our own souls from withering, to keep our spirits alive, to awaken our sense of wonder and to live as whole people. We *need* to praise and worship.

I think I’ve shared before an example of this need to praise that a colleague told of in relation to his young son who was around 8 or 9 years old. He and his son went out in their new fishing boat for the first time. It was a perfect day, sunshine and gentle breeze, and they decided to see what that boat motor could do; they cranked it up to full throttle and roared across the lake. His son exuberantly stood up and lifted up his arms, looking for the way to express his elation. What popped into his young mind? The first two words of Handel’s Hallelujah Chorus. He sang out, “Hallelujah! Hallelujah!” as the boat flew across the water. Sometimes, you just need to let a Hallelujah rip out of your soul. Sometimes you just need to praise God.

And why do we feel that need? The last verses of the psalm explain it eloquently: “For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.” God is *good*. That is certainly one of the fundamental assertions of our Christian faith, and probably of many others, too. God is good. And we can see that goodness in God’s enduring and

steadfast love and in God's faithfulness to all generations. God is not like us; God is *not* flaky, inconsistent, too busy, distracted elsewhere, preoccupied, losing interest, forgetful. God is not like that, as we so easily can be! God is steadfast in loving. God is faithful in mercy. God is enduring in grace. In times of crazy change and events, aren't you glad that God's love is unchanging, steadfast, and enduring? The love of God is non-negotiable; it's a given; we can't change it. That's how good God is!

God is *always* good. In the midst of a pandemic. In the midst of racial injustice. In the midst of peaceful protests or violent riots or responses. In the midst of confusion and uncertainty about how public safety should be maintained. In the midst of all the unknowns about how the coronavirus shapes the future. God is good. God is always good. That *doesn't* mean that God doesn't burn with anger over racial injustice and grieve over every act of violence or feel the weariness of health care workers and the ill amidst the pandemic. Without a doubt, God is among us and working towards justice and healing in all of these situations! God's goodness *doesn't* mean that God is aloof or distant from our human struggles, quite the contrary! Nor would I ever suggest that we can look to worship God as a way to escape painful realities. God is passionately involved in the world, and we are called likewise. God's goodness is simply indicative of God's unwavering love and commitment to the whole world, no exceptions. And acknowledging and praising that goodness of God keeps us whole. It prevents us from turning too inward and becoming overly self-involved. It stops us from simply despairing over how sin can infiltrate ourselves and our society. It keeps us from losing heart over a pandemic which we cannot control. It enables us to take a longer view and discover the hope within every situation. Praising *God's* goodness is *good* for us. Making a joyful noise to the Lord unites us with all the

earth. We look forward to whenever and however we may come together for in-person worship, a date still unknown. But united in the Spirit, we are still a worshiping community of praise even now. Give thanks to God. Bless God's name. For the Lord is good. Amen.