

December 29, 2019
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“A New Song”
Psalm 96



SCRIPTURE

- ¹ O sing to the LORD a new song;
sing to the LORD, all the earth.
- ² Sing to the LORD, and bless the divine name;
proclaim the good news of our salvation from day to day.
- ³ Declare the LORD’s glory among the nations,
and the wonders of God among all peoples.
- ⁴ For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised;
more to be revered above all gods.
- ⁵ For all the gods of the peoples are idols,
but the LORD made the very heavens.
- ⁶ Ever before the LORD are honor and majesty;
strength and beauty fill the divine sanctuary.
- ⁷ Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples,
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
- ⁸ Ascribe to the LORD the glory due the divine name;
bring an offering, and come into the LORD’s courts.
- ⁹ Worship the LORD in holy splendor;
let the whole earth tremble before God.
- ¹⁰ Say among the nations, “The Lord is king!
The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved.
The LORD will judge the peoples with equity.”
- ¹¹ Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;
let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
- ¹² let the field exult, and everything in it.
Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy
- ¹³ before the LORD who is coming,
who is coming to judge the earth.
The LORD will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with truth.

OPENING

Let us pray... *Praise and glory to you, oh gracious God, for this day and this season of Christmas! It is truly an amazing blessing given to us from the great, just, and generous, divine king. Pour out your Spirit upon us now, and speak the truth to us all. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.*

Our psalm opens with the line, “O sing to the Lord a new song”! Well, what’s wrong with our old songs? I like them better. Our old songs are comfortable and familiar. They bring happy

memories to our minds, and confidence as we boldly sing out the memorized lyrics and tunes. Even after 30 years we can sing along whenever that golden oldie comes on. These are the songs we should be sticking with! Forget the new songs. The new songs are uncomfortable. We don't know the words and the tunes seem strange. Maybe the band or the choir doesn't know the song as well. Certainly the song does not remind us of anything good from the past. And let's all just be honest: sometimes when we are singing a new song, we're just a little off-key and just a little lost. Here's the thing, though: the old songs don't always correspond to what God is currently up to. Sometimes, God is doing brand new things, and brand new things call for brand new songs. If that makes you uneasy or uncomfortable, you are not alone: change and uncertainty can often seem threatening. When things are not as expected, we get disoriented. Perhaps, this is why so many failed to recognize who Jesus was 2,000 years ago – Jesus' melody seemed different and strange. What kind of king is born in a stable's manger instead of a grand palace? What kind of savior takes the form of an itinerant preacher instead of a military leader like King David? What kind of divine messiah is killed upon a cross? This was not the song people were used to singing. And yet, this song, like all the songs before it, point to the very same God – they point to a God, who is, well, I'll let the psalmist speak for himself:

⁴ *For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised;
more to be revered above all gods.*

⁵ *For all the gods of the peoples are idols,
but the LORD made the very heavens.*

⁶ *Ever before the LORD are honor and majesty;
strength and beauty fill the divine sanctuary.*

This is the God about whom we sing! The LORD who is, "I Am" (Exodus 3:14). The same God of Abraham, Isaac, and of Jacob. The same God whom Miriam, Moses, and the Israelites sang to after being delivered from slavery in Egypt. This is the same God whom Mary praises in her majestic Magnificat, as she sings:

*"My soul magnifies the LORD,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (Luke 1:46-47)*

This is the true, faithful, and delivering God about whom we can sing new songs about confidently and without anxiety, because even if the melody is new, the God behind the music is not. This God is not like the false deities that tempt our devotion. Fleeting false deities that inevitably leave us empty.

The Psalmist warns us of false deities. Back then the ancients believed they were surrounded by a plethora of different gods, and each performed different functions. Today, at least in the West, we are less likely to subscribe to multiple gods; in fact, today many claim not to believe in any gods at all. But that doesn't mean we don't have tempting forces drawing us away from God with false promises of justice and salvation. How quickly we become beholden to idols such as government power, money, entertainment/amusement, militarism, racism, and blind nationalism. It is easy to make these things gods that promise salvation. Yet all too often they deliver a substandard liberation, if any at all, and it almost always comes at the expense of others. The psalmist calls these gods "nobodies." They are worthless, futile, and insufficient. They are simply shams, or illusions, created by human hands. But, the God of the Psalmist is not created by human hands. The God of the

Psalmist is not created at all! The true God is a creator, the true God creates! God created the very heavens where the ancient idols were rumored to live, and the very base materials we use to create our idols today.

That reminds me of a story: One of humanity's greatest scientists yells out to God saying, "We don't need you anymore God! We create just as well as you do, even better than you! And we can now create life for ourselves without your help. We can clone, grow organs, and bring things to life. Anything you used to do, we can now do better in a laboratory. We can create life just like you did in Genesis." Hearing this, God responds, "Is that so? I welcome you to try. Show me how you create life yourself just as I did." The scientist smirks and says, "gladly," and he leans over to begin collecting the dirt on the ground, but God interrupts, saying, "Whoa, whoa, whoa... get your own dirt."

The true God, the God *about whom* we sing a new song, created everything, from the dust on the ground to the oxygen in the air. And when we sing new songs about this God, we are witnessing these great acts to everyone who hears them. As Martin Luther always used to say, "The Devil dreads a singing Christian." And no wonder, a singing Christian whose lips contain a new song to the LORD might be overheard by any number of people, and, who knows who might just start singing along? No wonder this psalm is featured every year at Christmastime when the music is most catchy. Perhaps, this is even what Buddy the elf, played by Will Ferrell in the classic Christmas movie *Elf* (2003), meant when he says, "The best way to spread Christmas Cheer, is singing loud for all to hear!"

But singing is not the only thing the psalmist talks about. Our psalm says:

- 7 *Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples,
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.*
- 8 *Ascribe to the LORD the glory due the divine name;
bring an offering, and come into the LORD's courts.*
- 9 *Worship the LORD in holy splendor;
let the whole earth tremble before God.*

Now, the translation "ascribe" here can be a bit clunky because we don't use that word all that often today. The original Hebrew word might be better translated as "give." So we are called to *give* to the LORD... *Give* to the LORD glory; *give* to the LORD strength; *give* to the LORD all the glory due the divine name. On top of giving, we are told *bring* an offering to the LORD, *worship* the LORD, and *tremble* before the LORD.

Do you see what is happening here? The psalmist has moved from the commands to sing, tell, and declare – all verbal actions – to the commands to ascribe/give, bring, come, worship, and tremble – all kinetic actions. I'll say again, the psalmist has moved from the commands to sing, tell, and declare – all verbal actions – to the commands to ascribe/give, bring, come, worship, and tremble – all kinetic actions. In other words, **our new song to and about the LORD has become a way of behaving, a way to move – a way of life. To put it simply, our song has added its own dance.** What we say corresponds with what we do. We are living out a song and dance to the LORD. A song and dance that can be summed up succinctly with one phrase: "*The LORD is king!*"

As the psalmist says:

10 *Say among the nations, "The Lord is king!
The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved.
The LORD will judge the peoples with equity."*

"*The LORD is king!*" This is the heart of this psalm. Indeed, many argue this is the heart of the entire psalter, the Bible, even our faith itself. This means that every word we speak and every action we take should point to this one truth. Every song we sing and every dance we perform should make the claim clearly that, "*The LORD is king!*"

But I warn you, this is a bold and radical claim that usually meets with very stiff resistance from the powerful who seemingly run this world. Because when we declare our allegiance to one king, it means other kings *don't* receive have our allegiance. So, when the psalmist said back then, "The LORD is king!" they were also saying to the ancient, imperial rulers, that they were not the true kings. Similarly, when the early Christians claimed "Jesus is king" or "Jesus is Lord," that meant that Caesar was not. Furthermore, saying "The LORD is king!" carries with it a whole host of priorities, policies, and promises – it is a song with a dance, a formative kind of worship! This is not unlike how subscribing to politicians and platforms today works. Saying "Make America Great Again," "I'm With Her," or "Win with Warren" each carry with them certain priorities, policies, and promises, as well as their own types of songs and dances.

So do you see why this is such a radical and bold claim? Matthew describes King Herod as feeling so threatened and frightened by reports that the "king of the Jews" had been born in Bethlehem, he massacres a number of infants looking for this king who threatens his throne, thereby forcing Jesus, Mary, and Joseph to flee to Egypt. It seems that from the very beginning, Jesus ministry inevitably would lead *through* the cross.

So this song can be risky to sing, and even riskier to dance, because it shakes the pillars of the earthly powers to their very foundations. But even if humans were to be too frightened to sing this song and dance this dance, it is ultimately irresistible and unstoppable. The rocks and stones themselves will cry out (Luke 19:40), and the stars will sing praise to the LORD (Job 38:7).

As our psalm says:

11 *Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;
let the sea roar, and all that fills it;*
12 *let the field exult, and everything in it.
Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy*
13 *before the LORD...*

It's not enough that all the peoples and all the nations praise God, but the very fabric of creation rejoices! It's as if the universe has been created to sing God's praise.

It reminds me of CS Lewis' description of the creation of Narnia in the book *The Magician's Nephew* (1955):

"In the darkness something was happening at last. A voice had begun to sing...it seemed to come from all directions at once...Its lower notes were deep enough to be the voice of the

earth herself. There were no words. There was hardly even a tune. But it was beyond comparison, the most beautiful noise he had ever heard.”

The Christ figure, Aslan the Lion, sings into existence all of the world. This story is clearly influenced by the creation by God in Genesis 1. In the biblical account, all it takes is a word, and light enters the world, birds fill the air, fish fill the sea, and animals cover the grounds. Whose to say this was not word that was sung? A song that permeates everything? A drum beat calling us sympathize with the beat of the master drummer?

If you take just a moment, it's not hard to hear creation performing its songs of praise to the LORD. Go outside and just listen... The spring mornings greet you with songbirds singing their *lauds* of praise, and bid you good night each evening with their nightly *vespers*. Or, listen in on a late summer evening where a symphony of crickets and cicadas perform their nightly concert ringing throughout amphitheaters of forest and field. On a crisp, autumn day, you might hear the rustling of leaves as a westerly wind whips through the rusted reds, oranges, yellows, and browns, all the while giving praise to their creator and the creator's endless palette of colorful pigments. Even in the dead of winter, the silence and solitude of a delicate, white, blanket covering the ground performs a song – it's the notes in the rhythm *not* being played that grab your ear. Indeed, nature has a song and a dance, and this melody praises the LORD and declares God's imminent reign.

Now, perhaps if we humans spent less time exploiting and eliminating nature, and more time rejoicing with it, we might begin to understand God's reign as imminent. In other words, God's reign is a lot closer than it may sometimes seem! Because, make no mistake, God's sovereign, and total reign is coming...

As the psalmist concludes:

13 *...the LORD who is coming,
who is coming to judge the earth.
The LORD will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with truth.*

Now, this final direction the psalm takes us in the last first raises some questions: When you hear the LORD is coming to judge the world – our faith looks to Christ to fulfill this role – does this sound like good news or bad news to your ears? Is this impending arrival – this new song if you will – appear hopeful or threatening? Comforting or uncomfortable? In other words, do our ways of living point to the fact that “the LORD is king” or not? Do our priorities, policies, and promises, politically or otherwise, make the claim that “Jesus reigns” or not?

I think if it's the latter, we might have some tough questions to ask ourselves, like: What kinds of songs we are actually singing? What kinds of dances are we actually dancing? What kinds of kings are we are actually serving? And what kinds of gods we are actually worshipping?

But I tell you the psalmist has no such concerns. The psalmist is excited for a brand new song; the psalmist is joyfully anticipating the coming of the king to judge. Because this king will judge with perfect equity, perfect righteousness, and perfect truth. That means:

Gone will be the days of hunger, thirst, poverty, sickness, and despair.

Gone will be the groans of an abused creation as unpredictability and disaster cease.
Gone will be the hatred, lies, violence, unequal weights, corruption, oppression, and injustice.
Gone will be the anxiety and fear that shatters our shalom...

In their place will be songs of perfect love, joy, and thanksgiving. It's enough to make you sing out:
“*Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!*” (Revelation 22:20)

So as we move forward into a new year, a new decade even, let us focus with 20/20 vision on the new songs we sing and the new dances we dance. Let us focus on living out the promise and hope of Christmas – the dawning Christ's kingship, and the Lord's reign coming in it's fullness – all year round, and, perhaps, we might even sing some of the old songs anew, such as:

*Joy to the world! the Lord is come;
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare Him room,
and heaven and nature sing,
and heaven and nature sing,
and heaven, and heaven and nature sing.*

Amen, and Merry Christmas.