

Psalm 98: Singing a New Song

I am going to talk this morning about singing. The word psalm in Hebrew means a melody or song. The Psalm which I just read begins with these words: “O sing to the Lord a new song.” When we read this line we usually think of it as an invitation, a call to praise the Lord. This might seem like when our order of worship invites us to sing a hymn. But in the Hebrew in which the psalms were written, this singing was not an invitation but an imperative command. This psalm was most likely written as the people of Israel were returning to the Promised Land after their exile in Babylon. God has again delivered the people. They were first delivered from slavery in Egypt and then from captivity in Babylon. They are back in the land promised to them through their ancestors. Even if they will remain a puppet state under the control of other nations, they are home so they are rejoicing and singing. It is time for a new song, a song of praise rather than the lament they been singing in Babylon. But the first verse doesn’t end there. It continues: “for he has done marvelous things.” There is obviously a connection between the command to sing and the phrase which follows. The command to sing is because he has done marvelous things. Here again, the translation, while not wrong, fails to do justice to the importance, to the urgency of the new song which is being commanded. In Hebrew that “for” is *ki* (קַיְ) . This is a monosyllable with a harsh sound. “*ki*” If you are listening to it being read or sung as would have been the case historically, it is an abrupt attention getting sound in the midst of the melodic. Grammatically it is a demonstrative particle which is used for emphatic corroborative strengthening of the connection between the two phrases. The people are commanded to sing this new song because of what God has done. The next verses praise Yahweh for his steadfast love and faithfulness, for the victory which has brought them back to the homeland. Those who first understood that God had again intervened in history through the coming of Jesus were Jews, like Jesus. When they sought meaning for what had happened, they looked to what had previously been revealed to them through the Torah and the teachings of the prophets. So when they sought expressions of praise for the marvelous thing which God had now done in the world, this psalm and several others formed a continuing basis for them to offer their praise. In the form of the Messiah who fulfilled the ancient promise of redemption, God made known the victory over sin and death. God’s had again done a marvelous thing, and it was for all. The connection would have been especially clear to them because the Hebrew word translated as “victory” is “*yeshuah*” a verb that also means rescue, salvation. We usually pronounce it a little differently in the form of a noun: Jesus. In Matthew 1:21, Mary was told by the angel to name this coming son Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins. Those early followers of Jesus recognized that in Christ, God had revealed to the whole world the redemption that was being offered. “All the ends of the earth have seen the victory—the redemption—of our God. From there it would surely flow that the world—that all creation—would join in that new song of celebration. All would make a joyful noise of song and praise to the Lord. So this Psalm was adopted into their worship as an expression for the marvelous thing which God had again done in delivering the people. In the latter verses of this psalm I am sure you can hear echoes of a well-known hymn we sing during this season: “Joy to the World.” The lyrics were written by Isaac Watts to music attributed to Handel. The hymn is an exuberant outpouring of joy and praise. “Joy to the world, the Lord is come. Let earth receive her king.

Let every heart prepare him room, and heaven and nature sing. Joy to the world the Savior reigns. Let us our songs employ, while fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains repeat the sounding joy." The lyrics seem to hardly be able to contain the joy and energy of the praise being sung. Just like our scripture reading. When the ancient Israelites thought of God, their first reflex was to offer praise. Unfortunately, that is not often our first reflex. We are often more utilitarian in our approach to the Lord. We ask for stuff. And while what we ask for may be needed, on this day and in this season, we might need to consider the idea of praising God first and foremost for the marvelous things he has done. Praise is our amazement at God and God's greatness, our recognition of the power and the tenderness of the creator who so loved the world that God became Incarnate and dwelt among us. Walter Brueggemann is an Old Testament scholar who has written extensively on the Psalms. He explains the psalms as Israel's book of praise. He also describes praise in the psalms in this way: "All of life is aimed toward God and finally exists for the sake of God. Praise articulates and embodies our capacity to yield, submit and abandon ourselves in trust and gratitude to the One whose we are." Praise enjoys and celebrates God's love, and it is our best attempt to feel, say, or sing something that is appropriate to God. Praise doesn't ask for anything. Praise doesn't say "What have you done for me lately?" Instead, praise exclaims joyously: "How great Thou art!" Praise is not productive. Praise doesn't work. Praise is that rare thing that is not about me, but about the awe and adoration of God—the God of creation, the God of Israel, the God whose steadfast love and faithfulness is beyond our comprehension, the God who came to earth to dwell among us and then to die for us. Praise is the antidote for despair and loneliness for if we make a joyful noise to the Lord, we experience a quiet, a peace in the soul and the presence of love which knows no bounds in our lives. Although the psalm proclaims the victory of the Lord, the world does not understand it. In Psalm 98 this victory, this rescue is proclaimed three times. Those living in Palestine at the time of the birth in Bethlehem were looking for a different victory. Except for a few to whom the announcement came, they did not recognize what had happened. Jesus lay in a manger, not a palace. Jesus surrounded himself with poor, clueless fishermen instead of the powerful of the day, Jesus recruited an army of grateful lepers instead of an army of soldiers. Jesus assumed a cross instead of a throne, a crown of thorns, not gold and jewels. Any who see faith in Christ as a way to power in America or any other place on earth misconstrue the heart of our faith. Our faith calls us to me more like Frodo and his companions in JRR Tolkien's Lord of the Rings trilogy. Their quest of the fellowship of the ring was not to possess the ring of power, but to destroy it. The essence of Christianity is not about Christians wielding power, but it is a yielding to the power of God. It is about following the way taught by the infant whose birth we celebrate. It is submitting to God's will so that we in love form communities which care for neighbor as self, where neighbor includes the world. The new song we are commanded to sing is one of continuous praise and the offering of self in service to God's plan of reconciliation of the whole world through love. So as our opening hymn calls us to rejoice with heart and soul and voice because Jesus Christ is born, the reason is much the same as in the Psalm: for God has done marvelous things, Christ was born to save. Thanks be to God.