

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Sixth Sunday of Easter
Sunday, May 9, 2021**

**“A Joyful Noise to the LORD”
Psalm 98**

The Rev. Dr. David Clark

“O sing to the LORD a new song,
for he has done marvelous things” (v. 1).

Our Psalm in Unison begins with a verse that’s a wonderful entry into this psalm, because it offers—in some ways—the whole psalm (maybe even the whole Psalter?) in miniature. That verse contains two parts: a call to praise God, and a reason why—and each part is somehow incomplete without the other. Could we, as the church, describe God without also praising God? Or could we, as the church, praise God without describing the God whom we praise? Imagine a worship service in which the kindness of God were described in great detail—but no praise offered... Or imagine a worship service in which God were praised—but without reference to the praiseworthy ways of God... Yet in the first verse of our psalm, we find these two parts held together: “O sing to the LORD a new song, *for he has done marvelous things.*” This is an invitation to praise that arises from the goodness and kindness of God.

That’s what we see in the first verse—and that’s also how the whole Psalm unfolds. The rhythm of Psalm 98 is: *praise God—for God has done this!* or *praise God—and here’s why!* Twice, the psalmist offers a call to praise—and twice, the psalmist offers reasons for praise. Try to keep this rhythm in mind as we explore the Psalm: call to praise, and reason for praise, in an ongoing cycle of praise.

The psalm begins with that first call to praise: “O sing to the LORD a new song.” For the psalmist, the old songs won’t do: a new song is needed, because God has done something new (cf. García). And what is this new thing that God has done? As this rhythm of continues, the psalmist tells us:

“for he has done marvelous things.

His right hand and his holy arm have gotten him victory.

The LORD has made known his victory;

he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations.

He has remembered

his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel.

All the ends of the earth

have seen the victory of our God” (vv. 1-3).

Why must a new song be sung? Because—the psalmist tells us—because God has remembered God’s people with love and faithfulness, achieving a victory and revealing that victory far and wide.

And the rhythm of *call to praise* and *reason for praise*—this rhythm continues with yet another invitation to praise:

“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” (vv. 4-6).

Notice how much more sweeping is this next call to praise: the psalmist began by calling for “a new song”...yet now—after announcing the victory of God’s love and faithfulness—now the psalmist isn’t content with just a song, but invites “joyful noise” and “joyous song” from “all the earth,” a global ensemble of lyres and trumpets and horns. One new song? That’s no longer enough for the psalmist, who will now settle for nothing less than the biggest of big bands.

And is the psalmist done? Not even close! So far, the psalmist focused on human praising: it started with a “new song,” that grew with swelling instrumentation...but then we hear this:

“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” (vv. 7-9a).

The psalmist progresses from instruments to nature! It’s possible you’ve heard this psalm so many times that you’re used to it, but hear this afresh: for the psalmist, the victory of God’s love and faithfulness is so praiseworthy that the human orchestra just won’t suffice, and now needs the accompaniment of shouting oceans and clapping waters and singing hills. One paraphrase of our psalm expresses it like this:

“Let the sea and its fish give a round of applause,
With everything living on earth joining in.
Let ocean breakers call out, ‘Encore!’
And mountains harmonize the finale” (MSG).

And what comes next? You can expect it now, that—in the rhythm of the psalm—this call to praise will be followed by yet another reason for praise:

“for he is coming to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with equity” (v. 9).

And that’s how the psalm ends, with this assurance that our world—in which real justice is so often gut-wrenchingly absent—that our world will yet be touched by the justice of God, who will “judge” (that is, bring justice) with “righteousness” and “equity.” One scholar describes the justice of God, especially as we find it described in the Psalms, like this: the judgment of God in the Old Testament means “God restoring harmony to communities that are broken,” and so psalms “about God ‘judging’ the nations” describe “God’s work to restore the harmony and goodness God intended in creation,” through “practices that maintain communities and encourage human flourishing” (Creach).

In this psalm, we find this wonderful rhythm of calls to praise and reasons for praise—“O sing to the LORD a new song, *for he has done marvelous things*” (v. 1). At the same time, in these

invitations to praise, we find also a broadening, an expanding, a widening of praise: to start, the psalmist calls just for “a new song” (v. 1), but then for a “joyful noise” from “all the earth” (v. 4), and finally for music of praise from “the floods” and “the hills” (v. 8): what starts as “a new song” reverberates louder and louder, from more and more voices, until—in the psalmist’s vision—everyone and everything has joined together in praise.

And in this way, with this ever-expanding call for praise, the psalmist announces that this victory of God’s “steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel” (v. 3)—that this reveals Good News for everyone. This psalm celebrates a victory that reveals the kindness of God—and, for the psalmist, all the world should sing because the kindness of God is Good News for all. One writer puts it like this: “The salvation and liberation [...] of God’s action [...] are a sign of God’s gift to humanity and to all creation. [...] [E]ven the sea and the earth are invited to praise and rejoice. [...] [A]ll are invited, all are redeemed. [...] [N]o dimension of reality will be untouched by the redeeming activity of God” (García).

At the core of this psalm is some sort of victory, this victory of God’s “steadfast love and faithfulness” (v. 3) that’s so sweeping and universal that it calls for praise from every voice and every valley, from every mouth and every mountain. And for centuries, the church has read and prayed and sung this psalm as a celebration of the victory that God achieved in Christ: for centuries, the church has embraced this psalm as a celebration of the “marvelous things” (v. 1) that God has done in Christ—especially at Christmas and at Easter.

In the early church, our psalm was read during Advent (Mays)—and it’s still today a psalm appointed by the Lectionary for Christmas. And it’s because of this connection—between this psalm and Christmas—that you probably know this psalm a bit better than you might think... You may even have noticed something oddly familiar about that verse near the end: “Let the *floods* clap their hands; let the *hills* sing together for joy” (v. 8). Does that ring a bell: “floods,” “hills,” “joy”? “Joy to the earth! the Saviour reigns: let us our songs employ, while fields and *floods*, rocks, *hills* and plains repeat the sounding joy, repeat the sounding joy, repeat, repeat the sounding joy” (Watts). It was this psalm that Isaac Watts “transformed” (Mays) into “Joy to the World”—so that the victory of God in Psalm 98 could be celebrated in the coming of the Saviour.

And on this Sixth Sunday of Easter, this psalm also gives us voice to praise God for the victory of love and faithfulness in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It’s not by accident that this psalm has been appointed by the Lectionary for the season of Easter: this psalm calls for praise because God “has done marvelous things” (v. 1)—and in this season of awe and celebration for the resurrection, this psalm enables the church to respond with praise because God raised Jesus from the dead. In the Risen Christ, God “has done marvelous things” (v. 1); in the Risen Christ, God “has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness” (v. 3); in the Risen Christ, God “has made known his victory [...] in the sight of the nations” (v. 2) and to “[a]ll the ends of the earth” (v. 3); in the Risen Christ, God “is coming” to “judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity” (v. 9).

And so what can the church do today but respond with praise? As the church, we cannot help but praise. In this season of Easter, we stand, together with the church of all times and places, before the empty tomb: how could we remain silent? With such a victory before our eyes, how

could we do anything else but offer praise to God? Christ is Risen, so we must “[m]ake a joyful noise” (v. 4); Christ is Risen, so we cannot do otherwise but “break forth into joyous song and sing praises” (v. 4); Christ is risen, so “Let the sea roar, and all that fills it” (v. 7), “Let the floods clap their hands,” and “let the hills sing together for joy” (v. 8).

And you may be thinking: yes, but we’re videoconferencing, with limited sound quality, far apart from one another, under a stay-at-home order... And it’s true: we’re not gathered together in a beautiful sanctuary, with a full choir and a resounding organ—and yet, praise is never out of season. We, as the church, can always offer praise—because “God is good all the time” (Holbert). Even amid challenging, discouraging, disheartening circumstances, we may still—defiantly—offer our praise to the God who is always kind and always loving, and who has revealed the victory of love and kindness in the resurrection of Jesus Christ: “O sing to the LORD a new song,
for he has done marvelous things” (v. 1). Amen.