

Sing Gladly

Jeremiah 31:7-14

Ephesians 1:3-14

In 1997 my wife Linda and I had the privilege of joining a group of elders in planting a new Presbyterian Church. Most of those elders **were** elder, at least 65 years of age. But to our surprise they all agreed to go with a somewhat relaxed, contemporary worship music style. We called it James Taylor church. At first we used guitars, then added a piano, then drums and a bass guitar. Most of the songs we sang in worship were played on Christian radio stations. Demographic studies told us our area was dominated by country music listeners. Our music, while not country, was down to earth. People liked it. We grew pretty rapidly. But we did find our music choice caused at least one problem: in those early years it was too mellow.

Then our sound guy, a twenty-something charter member of our congregation, brought us a slogan he'd heard Garth Brooks use at a concert. As with James Taylor, most everybody who attends a Garth Brooks concert knows all the words to all the songs. And they like to sing along. Some artists do not like this; Brooks long ago decided to embrace it. After one of his first numbers he told the audience, "Look, if you can't sing good and loud, just sing loud!" This became our slogan at church. Every Sunday our worship leader would encourage everybody to just sing loud. It helped change the spirit of our services. When surrounded by people singing their hearts out even the shyest among us usually can let go of their inhibitions. And God

gets praised with more force.

Church, “If you can’t sing good and loud, just sing loud” is actually a biblical statement. From cover to cover the Bible tells us to praise God with energy. Our passage from the prophet Jeremiah opens with these words: “For thus says the Lord, ‘Sing aloud with gladness...’” To be honest, such a positive command does not fit the general tone of Jeremiah. In soccer, when one team dominates the game but gives up a goal, it is called “scoring against the run of play”. Here we read a passage against the run of Jeremiah. According to scholar John Bright fully 95% of the Book of Jeremiah consists of warnings, threats, lamentations and judgment. In fact, this chapter seems so out of place some scholars deny it came from Jeremiah himself. But to this reader it clearly did and for one simple reason. Jeremiah had heard the Lord predict that something wonderful was about to happen.

Jeremiah's career spanned a critical time. Israel, the northern half of David and Solomon's kingdom, had already disappeared under the boots of the Assyrian armies. Young King Josiah of Judah, the southern half where Jeremiah lived, was trying to root out corruption in the Temple leadership and in government. He correctly understood Jeremiah's threats as oracles from God, promising that Judah too must reform or disappear. But as the years passed not enough changed. Josiah died, and with him any chance the Jews had of getting their act together before God came calling. Jeremiah lived to watch the Babylonians flatten Jerusalem, destroy the Temple and carry him—along with thousands of Jews—into slavery.

More years passed. Jeremiah's prophecies remained dark and foreboding. But eventually God gave him something new to tell his fellow Jews. We just read a part of that new thing. From the depths the people of God would climb to the heights of the Temple mountain, Mt. Zion. From slavery they would return to sovereignty in the Promised Land. Therefore they must, "Sing aloud...!" Though their present days might yet be filled with suffering they soon would receive blessing upon blessing from the Lord. They needed, Jeremiah meant, to start singing even **before** the blessings materialized. We occupy a similar position today. Though the promised two-week shutdown has now lasted over nine months, we have legitimate reason to believe something new is about to happen. The vaccines have arrived. The pandemic will end. It hasn't yet, but we need to start thanking God now.

We need to praise God in all times and situations. Praising God needs to be an integral part of our lives, so automatic it becomes an involuntary reflex, like breathing. Besides, 2020 is **not** the worst year in history. Yes, most of us know at least one person killed by COVID-19. Yes, our nation suffered yet more racial injustice and the resulting protesting. Yes, a different group hit the streets to try to intimidate our culture into accepting their anarchic, radical agenda. But with only a few seconds' thought we can list worse times in America: 1929-44; 1860-65; even 1775-78, when a smallpox epidemic ravaged the colonies, whose armies suffered repeated defeats at the hands of the British. Times have been worse. Times have been better. Whatever the case, if we cannot sing good and loud, let us just sing loud praises to God.

A convocation of English and Scottish Presbyterian ministers wrote the Westminster Catechism in the 1640s. The Shorter Catechism was used to instruct those seeking to become members of Presbyterian churches. It proved handy and popular. The Southminster Presbyterian Church in Prairie Village, Kansas used it for that purpose until at least 1973, when I went through confirmation and joined that congregation. Our minister made us memorize the whole thing. All 107 questions and answers in it. Actually, I memorized only the seven or eight he assigned each week, promptly forgetting the others. Yet to my surprise, to this day an answer will pop into my head, often in a time of need.

Recently a member of this congregation asked me what I thought the purpose of life was. Question One of the Westminster Shorter Catechism immediately came to mind. (Before I recite it please understand that I learned it before inclusive language became standard.) “Q1: What is the chief end of man? A1: The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” To translate into today's idiom: the purpose of life is to praise God and celebrate God forever. We are put here in order to praise God. We are put here to sing loud. Or as the Apostle Paul put it in his letter to the Ephesians, “we who first hoped in Christ have been destined and appointed to live to the praise of his glory.” Why do we live? We live to sing praises to God in Christ.

Thank God the calendar has turned. While 2020 was not the worst of all years, it was pretty bad. Yet even now we who hope in Christ are destined to praise him. Finally, another Presbyterian note. That word destined has an important meaning.

God planned everything before time began. We have a role to play in that plan. The plan circles back to God's own self, so that the point of it all has been, is and always shall be that we glorify and enjoy God forever. Remember this when you feel discouraged, when you feel angry, when you feel abandoned, when you feel nothing matters after all. Turn to God in all circumstances. Praise God in every season. Sing loud. God is listening.