

Just Sing Loud

Psalm 89:1-4

Luke 1:46b-55

A black Gospel choir doing the two-step slide and turn, wearing multi-colored robes, singing at the top of their lungs, with a woman shouting out, "Praise Jesus" and a man, "Amen!"

A full orchestra and chorus, resplendent in formal wear, playing Handel's oratorio, The Messiah.

Our children last Sunday, wearing their costumes (including baby Jesus with her pink socks!), standing before us singing carols.

The crowd over at the big box church, singing the repetitive but personal praise songs addressed to God in the first person. A rock band accompanies them, complete with stage lighting and video screen.

What do these groups have in common? All of them can move us spiritually. In fact, we can say that the Holy Spirit has entered into them and given them the feeling that they have somehow experienced God's presence. Moreover, those attending to their songs can feel that same inspiration. The word inspiration literally means

breathing in. Singing praises to God can empower us to breathe in the oxygen of God. Giving praise can help us drink in the power of the Holy Spirit.

It has always been thus. One of the most popular praise songs of 15-20 years ago, I Will Sing of Your Love Forever, paraphrased the first four verses of Psalm 89 for its lyrics. Psalm 89 is thought to be one of the oldest of all the psalms, dating perhaps to 3,000 years ago. Its title reads “A Maskil of Ethan”. So first off, maybe Ethan Kershaw is older than we thought! Scholars have no confidence about the other Ethan's identity, only that the vocabulary and syntax of his writing is archaic, quite old. “Maskil” *probably* means that this is one of thirteen psalms to be chanted—or *sung*—with great fervor. To be sung *hard*. Most but not all of these thirteen are psalms of praise. Though the rest of Psalm 89 asks the Lord for protection against enemies, even those verses have praise interlaced into them. The four opening verse we read today are pure praise.

“I will sing of your steadfast love, O Lord, forever,” they begin. God's love is steadfast: pure, perfect and forever. The second half this first verse proclaims that God's faithfulness is just as steadfast. The second verse repeats these thoughts. And here is where we ought to say that in Hebrew these verses rhyme in a fairly sophisticated pattern. Having declared the total reliability of God's love and faithfulness, the psalmist continues in verse three to note that the Lord has *sworn* a covenant with King David. The implication is that if this steadfast God has made a promise, God will certainly keep it. Verse four tells us what God has sworn. “I will

establish your descendants forever, and build your throne for all generations.” But these words meant something different for the ancient Hebrews than they do for us.

The Hebrews believed these promises meant that they would populate the Holy Land forever (“I will *establish* your descendants forever..”), and that a King of the Jews from the Davidic line would forever rule over them. With the benefit of hindsight, we know that second interpretation has not proved true. The last Jewish king lost his throne after his people rose up against the Romans in 70AD. And he was not even from the line of David. No, we believe these promises refer to the Messiah, to Jesus, whose birth we celebrate tonight and tomorrow. This passage appears in the lectionary on this last Sunday of Advent because the Christian church has always seen as a messianic prophecy. God would in due course come to earth and rule as a descendant of David. He would renew his commitment to blessing and *spiritually* protecting his new Chosen People, those who believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior. Therefore we sing his praises in this and every worship service.

The passage we read from Luke contains the Magnificat, Mary's song of praise to God. (“Magnificat” comes from the Latin and it means, “I magnify”.) It is a curious fact that, while many biblical passages have been set to choral music, Mary's Magnificat lacks a well-known setting. If I say words from Isaiah, “Wonderful, Counselor, Almighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace,” what comes into your head? Is it not a movement from Handel's Messiah? If I say words from Matthew, “Our Father, which art in heaven,” is it not Albert Hay Malotte's setting of the Lord's

Prayer? According to French composer and scholar Peter Abelard, who lived from 1079 to 1142, the Magnificat is one of the “eight most ancient Christian hymns”. Believers have sung these words from the very start. Yet this inspired outburst from Mary does not have an established version. Maybe I'll take a crack at it after I retire.

Or not. Mary's words *are* inspiring. They deserve treatment from a composer who has actual talent. (Side note: Cetta DePaola jokes online about getting paltry royalty checks for two romance novels she has written. Please understand, I am not accusing her of lacking talent. I just have not read her books, as I am reasonably certain they would not appeal to my tastes, which run in a more cloak-and-dagger direction.) I have published two praise songs, entitled Move Spirit, Move and Gotta Say Thank You. You can look them up. What you cannot find is a single video of anybody actually singing them. Our previous church keeps them in the rotation of about 75 praise songs they sing, and a smattering of other churches do too. But so few do that the publishing house has not seen fit to send me a check since we moved here over five years ago. Not that I am bitter or anything.) Back to Mary.

One thing that sets apart the Magnificat is its improbability. Luke and Matthew give us most of what we know about Mary. They depict her as an unassuming girl from a town in Galilee, an uneducated and humble young woman. The 2005 movie, The Nativity Story does a brilliant job of showing her and Joseph's lives in Nazareth. The daily struggle to get and prepare food. The incredible closeness of life in an extended family who live not just next door, but often under the same roof. The

expectations placed on the shoulders of a girl, who must accept her parents' choice for a husband, and also who must avoid the merest hint of impropriety. The struggle her parents endure when she must tell them she is pregnant. I highly recommend The Nativity Story. I cannot remember a more realistic portrait of a biblical story. Except for Mel Gibson's The Passion of the Christ. Our small group in Traverse City planned one night to watch that one, and then discuss it over dinner at a restaurant. Walking out of the theater we all agreed we did not feel like eating and we just went home.

Mary, this humble girl (between fourteen and possibly twenty years of age), this young woman who has probably never gotten more than ten miles from her ancestral home, this dime-a-dozen human being from nowhere, reacts to the most earth-shattering news with a calm, accepting spirit. Apparently, God chose her well. She is pregnant. The father is the Holy Spirit. He will become the Messiah. Deal with it. And she does. In fact, she *praises* God for the update. Her life has just jarringly swerved from the direction not only she, but her entire family and town have assumed it would take. How would you react to that? This is the stuff of Tik Tok and Instagram videos. Women who learn they have cancer in the middle of a pregnancy. Men whose significant others break up with them out of nowhere. This genre of video gains far greater viewership when the “victim” responds as Mary did, when they accept the tough news and keep up their *spirits*.

One common and powerful way people can accomplish the difficult task of remaining thankful to God even in the face of trouble is this. They have the habit of

joining their brothers and sisters in Christ in weekly services of praise to him. My mother died August 14 of 2023. It was a Monday. She had attended worship at her church eight days before—despite having spent five days in the hospital in between. She could not *not* go to church. The woman who attended to her with incredible devotion for the last fifteen years of her life tells me nobody has yet *dared* to sit in the pew she occupied with my family for, lo, those many years. Somehow even visitors know not to go there. At her funeral the director roped off the first couple of rows for us, as customary. But Linda said, “We *really* need to sit in your family's pew.” So we did. And it felt completely right. Since the mid-70's people had commented on how nice it was to hear my family sing from that pew in three-part harmony. We sang loudly. Dad and I sang bass. Two of my brothers sang tenor. Mom sang alto with a velvety, gorgeous voice. My other brother somehow did not get the music gene and he tended to mumble the words.

I love my parents. I love my family. But I recognize we did not constitute a perfect example. Unlike Mary. Yet I think singing loudly in praise of God our Creator and Redeemer is exemplary. We did it not to receive credit, but because it built us up mentally and spiritually. We *need* to magnify the Lord. And the Lord rewards our magnification. Church, there is probably no practice we can observe that will achieve the goal of magnification more strongly than singing like a black Gospel choir, with abandon and joy. Can we make that our common goal? I certainly hope we can.

Because praise makes us all grateful and aligns us with God's purposes.