

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
August 9, 2020

Sing for Joy

1 Chronicles 15:11-22

We began today's worship service the same way we begin every worship service—by singing. Our first act of praise is to lift our voices to the Lord through music. Before we start announcing, reading, praying, and preaching, we start singing. The screen came down, Willis struck the first note on his keyboard, and off we went into our weekly encounter with the Lord.

Even though we don't have access to our hymnals right now, we have other, more high-tech ways of making sure that the music goes on. The coronavirus may have shut down many other parts of our lives, and altered various elements in our church service, but it can't stop our singing. Though even that form of worship has also come under scrutiny. As congregations began to reopen for in-person gatherings, there were some debates and discussions about whether choirs and congregational singing should be restricted. As far as I can tell, even though those debates were never completely resolved, the discussion seems to have died down.

Had they faced this kind of situation in ancient Israel, the Levites may have been forced to organize a virtual choir. After all, the worship of the Lord needs to go on. King David may have fouled up in his first attempt to bring the ark of the covenant back to Jerusalem, but that didn't mean God's people should slack up in their responsibility to seek the Lord, and to do so in appropriate ways.

In today's text, David's second attempt at installing the ark in Jerusalem is successful. Remember that the ark is the symbol of God's presence, so having it back in Jerusalem is a powerful testimony to the people's resolve to give God a central place in the community. God is not to be neglected. And one of the ways to ensure that God is not neglected is to faithfully seek him in worship, which includes music.

The Levites were given responsibility in this area. This was just one of several kinds of services that the Levites performed in connection with public worship. Look at the congregation's roster of officers and committees, and you'll see various Levites listed in several categories, such as gate keepers, guardians, Temple officials, judges, and craftsmen. The Levites' job description also required that they be skilled in music, both vocal and instrumental. They were essentially singing musicians.

In our text, the Levites were instructed to sing joyful songs. That didn't mean that every song had to be happy and clappy. It simply meant that the music needed to be grounded in what the Lord had done to redeem his people and to form them into a community that would reflect his character in the world. Joy isn't about our own determined attempts to be glad, no matter what we're up against. Joy is about God's action that delivers us, sustains us, and enables us to worship him, with our lips and our lives, to the praise of his glory.

Preacher Barbara Brown Taylor talks about how joy is different from happiness, pleasure, or fun. She says:

All of those depend on positive conditions—good health, good job, happy family, lots of toys. The only condition for joy is the presence of God. Joy happens when God is present and people know it, which means that it can erupt in a depressed economy, in the middle of a war, in an intensive care waiting room.¹

Or in the midst of a pandemic. COVID-19 is still spreading, and we're still singing. Joy doesn't mean that we'll wait until we have a vaccine before we dust off our instruments and warm up our voices. It means that every Sunday, when we gather in the Lord's presence, we'll unite our voices in praise and thanks to the one whose faithfulness and power to save give us indestructible hope, no matter what threatens us.

That's one of the blessings of congregational singing. It's a unifying act of worship in which each of us can participate. Many other elements of our service involve one person, coming before the congregation to read, to pray, or to preach. True, in one sense, each of these involves all of us in an act of listening or speaking. But there's nothing quite like the experience of each of us participating at the same time as you join your voice to other voices in song. Solos, ensembles, praise teams, and choirs are wonderful, but there's also something uniquely God-exalting about everyone in the pews contributing his or her voice as we present a musical offering to the Lord.

Granted, you may feel like your vocal contribution to that musical offering isn't as beautiful or polished as someone else's. I like the closing verse of today's text: "Kenaniah the head Levite was in charge of the singing; that was his responsibility because he was skillful at it" (v. 22). Churches need Kenaniahs. But the worshipfulness of a song doesn't hinge on whether everyone in the pews is a Kenaniah. Even if you're not, your voice is still needed.

One woman tells about how, in the middle of the soloist's number at church, her young grandson tugged on her sleeve and whispered, "She can't sing very well, can she?" Knowing the woman had a deep love for the Lord, she said, "She sings from her heart. That's what makes it good." The grandson nodded thoughtfully. Several days later as the two of them were singing along with the car radio, the grandson stopped and said, "Nana, you sing from your heart, don't you?"²

Worship music, especially congregational singing, helps ensure that our gatherings are heartfelt. True, various forms of worship music, including our hymns, help preserve and convey the content of our faith. The words of our songs help us express what we believe and how we should live. We're able to sing about our commitments and convictions. At the same time, we aim to sing with conviction. There's something about music that uniquely touches us not only at the cognitive level but at the emotional level as well. Music acknowledges feelings, and gives us a means of expressing feelings. As I heard one person capture it earlier this week, singing gives us a way of filling this space with emotion while at the same time absorbing emotion.³

When Kenaniah and the other Levites played their instruments and sang their songs, they were doing more than just articulating theological ideas. They were expressing joy. They weren't just being joyful in God's presence. They were being joyful because of God's presence. His presence in the life of his people. His presence through what he had done for his people, and would do for his people. So now, as then, when we come together to sing, sing for joy.

That doesn't mean we sing only songs that are joyful. Worship music can enable us to give voice to a range of emotions. Sometimes our songs help us mourn and lament. Sometimes our songs help us confess and repent. Sometimes our songs help us resist and protest. In the African American community's struggle for civil rights and social justice, gospel music has always been a source of encouragement, hope, and perseverance. Singing has been wielded as a peaceful weapon in the pursuit of God's kingdom.

Last year, hundreds of thousands of Christians in Hong Kong mobilized to protest an extradition bill that would have stripped protections for religious expression. One of their primary tools of resistance was the song, "Sing Hallelujah to the Lord." Written in 1974, the song has been beloved for generations. It's notable for its minor key and ease of harmony, especially when sung in a round. In this case, it became an anthem of allegiance, not to the state, but to the reign of God. I like the way one person has put it: "God's praises are often the soundtrack to redemptive suffering by God's people."⁴

The people of Israel knew plenty about suffering and redemption, bondage and deliverance. You can hear it in their songs. It's no accident that today's text, along with several other passages in 1 Chronicles, lay out God's instructions for how his redeemed people can worship through music. These were not peripheral matters. And those charged with musical responsibilities were critical to preserving, perpetuating, and proclaiming the saving work of God. So when the time came for the service to start, folks knew that something significant was about to begin. Kenaniah finished loosening up his vocal cords, glanced over at the Levites with harps and cymbals in hand, then nodded to the media technician at the back of the sanctuary. It was time to start singing hallelujah again.

Peter Boehler was instrumental in the conversion of both John and Charles Wesley. It's believed that Boehler once said, "If I had a thousand tongues, I would praise Christ with them all." According to many, this inspired Charles Wesley, who took the stray comment and turned it into lines that became the well-known hymn, "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing": "O for a thousand tongues to sing / My great Redeemer's praise, / The glories of my God and King, / The triumphs of his grace!" There are probably 30 to 40 tongues here in this place today, all at different levels of singing skill. What matters on this Lord's Day, and every Lord's Day, is that we combine them into a unified act of vocal praise, rejoicing in the salvation that God has made possible for us through Jesus Christ.

Theologian J. I. Packer wrote, "I've experienced God's presence most powerfully in worship, often during the singing, I suppose because when we sing to him, we are looking hard in his direction."⁵ In today's text, the Israelites haven't been looking as hard in God's direction as they should have. That's why they're given instructions about proper worship, including the music they use during their gatherings. In their life as God's people, God has gotten pushed off center. So in order for them to recenter themselves on the Lord, one of the things they need to do is warm up their voices, blow the dust off their instruments, and sing for joy.

The coronavirus has changed some things about how we do worship. Last Sunday, we noted how COVID-19 has affected the way we practice the Lord's Supper. Today, we see how music can't go untouched either. But still, we'll sing our way through this pandemic. And perhaps one of the good things that will come out of this whole situation is that we'll be less inclined to take for granted the seemingly small and routine things about church gatherings, those foundational pieces of our life together as God's people. Things like a handshake or hug, a bulletin, an offering plate, a fellowship meal. And yes, a hymnal, a prelude on the keyboard, a chorus you've memorized, a solo that always moves you. A joyful song that breaks forth because God is present.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Surprised by Joy." *The Living Pulpit* (October-December 1996) 16.

² Barbara McKeever, *Christian Reader*. "Kids of the Kingdom."

³ Morgan Lee, in Quick to Listen podcast. Episode 214. May 27, 2020.

⁴ "Hong Kong Christians Adopt 'Sing Hallelujah' as Protest Anthem." Preaching Today website. Accessed August 6, 2020 <<https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2019/july/hong-kong-christians-adopt-sing-hallelujah-as-protest-anthe.html>>.

⁵ J. I. Packer, *Leadership*, Vol. 12, No. 3.