

One who sings prays twice

Jan Wiersma

Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

Ascension/Music Appreciation Day - May 21, 2023

Texts: Ephesians 1:15-23, Psalm 47, Luke 24:44-53

Ephesians 1:20-23

God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Psalm 47 (adapted from Nan Merrill, *Psalms for Praying*)

Clap your hands, people of all nations! Worship the Creator with songs of joy!

Rejoice in the beauty of diversity.

The Beloved of our hearts is mighty, reigning over all:

Love invites all people to share in creation, to seek peace and pursue it.

Let the Love that lives in you sing loud praises and join the star-decked dance of celebration!

Sing praises to the Creator, sing praises to the Beloved; let all sing praise.

May leaders of all nations gather as One to walk in peace.

For Earth is made of Love and Light;

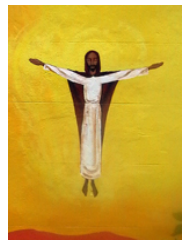
Following your will, we are on the path of healing.

We sing songs of gratitude for the Earth, our home;

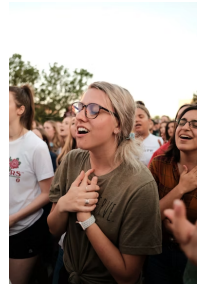
To you, Great Healer, life of our lives.

GOSPEL READING Luke 24:44-53

The very last words in the Gospel of Luke describe the phenomenon known as the Ascension, when the risen Jesus left his disciples for the last time to return to heaven. Jesus said to them, 'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.' Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.' Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.



Did you hear that? Jesus has just left his people, for forever this time, but “*they returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.*” You remember, the last time, when he got dead, they were scattered and scared and hiding out in locked rooms. What happened? The real Christ showed up, ate some fish just to make the point, yes, I’m still here, I’m still real, and then he cracked them open, first their minds, and then their mouths. You are witnesses, he says, but witnesses aren’t witnesses until they say what they saw, right? But for now, what do they do? They go to church! They hang out in the temple. Why? Obviously! They’re singing their lungs out. Isn’t that what we do when we’ve got the joy joy joy joy down in our hearts? And if anyone ever told you you couldn’t sing, shame on them. They lied. And believe me, those disciples were not singing sad songs. Jesus set them free from their grief and their fear and they sang freedom songs of joy.



For Jews like Jesus, worship wasn’t worship without singing. All those 150 psalms? Sung out loud! And did you ever notice the disciples singing? The night before Jesus got dead, they ate the Passover meal, right? But Jesus, who *loved* to break rules, changed it up a little to *make* the new rule of the meal we know as communion. But Jesus didn’t *forsake* the rules because then, “When they had sung *the hymn*, they went out to the Mount of Olives” and we *know* all the rest of that sadness. But the Passover hymn wasn’t just any old hymn, and it wasn’t a funeral tune; it was *a hymn of freedom*, a hymn of joy and release from slavery in Egypt. The Passover was all about freedom. Remember that.

And remember Paul and Silas, arrested, beaten, jailed *and* put in stocks for witnessing, just like Jesus told them to do? If not, let me refresh your memory. They sat in that jail all bloody and chained up and *prayed and sang at midnight*. Like, breaking all the rules of prison. And all the prisoners were awake and cheering. Do you think they were singing the Folsom Prison Blues? No, they were singing songs of freedom because they knew darn well that prison couldn’t hold them. They were *witnessing*! And they sang so hard there was an earthquake and *everyone* was shaken loose from their chains. But nobody even tried to escape, because they knew for sure that freedom comes in bigger packages than just drawing the get-out-of-jail-free card. And they witnessed to the jailer himself and he fell on his knees and believed.



Singing your way to freedom didn’t stop with the Bible. Remember the 1914 Christmas truce, when German and British soldiers down in the filth of the trenches started¹ singing Christmas carols across the lines, until they all crawled out of the mud and met in the middle of No Man’s Land, sharing drinks and playing soccer *and singing together*? Disobeying orders, breaking rules, sure, but free for that one holy day from the command to kill each

¹ The Illustrated London News's illustration of the [Christmas Truce](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christmas_truce): "British and German Soldiers Arm-in-Arm Exchanging Headgear: A Christmas Truce between Opposing Trenches."
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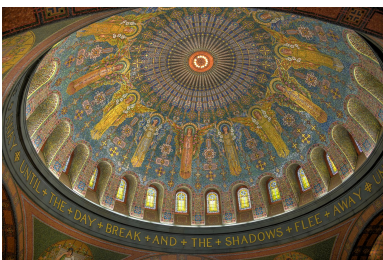
other, free to see one another as real people with families, friends, and even a *faith* just like their own. A freedom bigger than a war.

And remember the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement, and the peaceful protest marches in Washington and all over the country? Can we ever forget the songs that lifted their spirits and united their hearts and carried them all the way to freedom from Jim Crow and legalized segregation? The songs people still sing when we rise up against oppression and injustice? Like, “We Shall Overcome?” Or the freedom songs of South Africa, “We are marching in the light of God,” singing them to the end of *apartheid*? A freedom bigger than any nation or government! Like Jesus, they broke laws for freedom, and made new ones, never forsaking the people on the margins, the people Jesus freed.



Singing freedom happens every time God changes our mourning into dancing. It doesn't have to be a million person march, or a universal cause, it can be something as quiet as a moment in worship that brings tears to your eyes. Like in my church in Japan: I couldn't read the characters fast enough to sing along, always, but I knew the tunes. Every time I heard it, “Waga-shu, Jesu, Waga-shu Jesu, Waga-shu Jesu, Kami no aisu,” (“Jesus loves me”) or “Itsukushi mi fukaki, tomo naru Jesu wa...” (“What a friend we have in Jesus...”) I knew. I knew freedom in Christ crosses every human boundary. And I wept.

Or the first time I came home from Japan after my mother's death. Our whole family went to the cemetery on Easter morning to attend the sunrise service and to see her grave. Me for the first time. Have you ever seen Lakewood Cemetery on (Lake) Bde Maka Ska in Minneapolis? The chapel there is small and full of mosaics. The dome glitters with golden angels. The sun rose and broke through the stained glass windows and lit up the words around them: “Until the day break and the shadows flee away.” And an angel-voiced soprano sang Mozart's “Alleluia” while all the angels in heaven wept for joy. I wept then, too. Because when we sing the alleluia, “Praise God,” we bless the one who gives us freedom even over death. I knew then my mother might be gone from my sight, but never from my life, nor from God's love.



Friends, if anyone ever told you you can't sing, shame on them. They lied. Every person has a heart, every person has a tongue, every person has a gift. And even if you're too shy to sing out loud right now, today, there will come a time when all of us will sing as beautifully as the finest singer we have ever admired. John records his vision of heaven in the book of Revelation, “I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, singing with full voice, ‘Worthy is the Lamb



that was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!’ Then I heard *every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing*, ‘To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might for ever and ever!’” And you will be singing with them. Close your eyes, then, and imagine for a minute the promise:

You have a treasure in you, a seed of glory planted from stars,
a song written for only you to sing.

You have gifts to give. The treasure is buried, and it may take some digging to recover.

The song is forgotten, but still hidden in your bones. Nothing that happens to you can remove it, no fear or shame destroy it, no failure ruin it. It is who you are.

Rekindle the gift.

Listen for the quiet voice, the Spirit of Life singing in you. Listen... and sing.

Tune your life to its melody. Let it sing in you, let it sing you into life.

Rekindle the gift that is God within you. Give God this joy— for it is God who is singing.

(Steve Garnaas-Holmes; “Rekindle the Gift.”)

Thanks be to God who sings freedom in us. Amen

Prayers

For the spring song of the birds, and the hum of the highway; the purr of the cat and the whistle of the tea kettle; for the rustle of the leaves and the lap of water on sand; for all the songs of this bright world, we give thanks.

For the rattling of swords, the shock of bombs, for the silence of a clearcut forest and the wail of the bereaved of war, we beg forgiveness.

For the new voices of those you are even now calling to lead us into the future with word and song: pastor, choir director, handbell director. Bless them and open their hearts to answer the call.

For the music of the spheres that is always tuned to heaven, for the freedom to sing our praise aloud, for the sure hope of singing in your choir forever, we rejoice and bless you.

For those whose voices have given us joy, we pray freedom from isolation, addiction, illness, uncertainty, sorrow and fear

And we give thanks for those who lift their voices to praise you in the prayer that Jesus, our savior and friend, taught his disciples: Our Father....