

“SINGING LIKE A BELL”

ISAIAH 61:10-62:3

PSALM 148

GALATIANS 4:4-17

MARKET SQUARE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN HARRISBURG,
PENNSYLVANIA

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DECEMBER 31, 2017

There is nothing so secular that it cannot be sacred, and that is one of the deepest messages of the Incarnation.” - Madeleine L'Engle

How do you feel now that Christmas is over? Well, it's not over; the feast of Christmas is celebrated on through Epiphany- January 6th. But it kind of feels like Christmas is over, doesn't it? The season of Advent- probably my favorite season of the church year- is sometimes confused with what got popularly labelled the Christmas season. And the whole idea of the Christmas season is not a bad thing...there's so much good that makes it what it is...all the more visiting and eating with family and friends, Christmas carols, the sweet expectation that dances in the eyes of children this time of year. I've also noticed that at least around the edges-where people aren't battling it out over a big sale- there still is an enlarged spirit of generosity that moves on the air among people. People seem to be in better moods. I've even noticed some people more willing to yield to pedestrians which I and my little dog Torrance really appreciate. But then so much of the Christmas season has to do with terrible busyness, shopping just to cover all the bases to make everybody happy and the crushing emptiness that bubbles up by the lights in the window when you realize the impossibility of that one task. It would serve all of us best to be still and know the Advent season for what it really is: the quiet waiting in the dark for the light of the world to break in upon our hearts, upon the overwhelming brokenness of the world for the redemption of all things, that we might know peace and have life abundantly. I hope you felt to some degree this season the gravity of the waiting, I hope you had a chance to struggle with the longing for a thing you couldn't name and maybe still can't, for the love that will not let you go. I hope you feel it still even as we acknowledge the light has come and time marches on. I hope in some way, you've done your waiting well.

But now- how do you feel now that the waiting is over? And it is, and the lectionary pushes us headlong into praise...and why not? The fullness of time has come, along with Anna and Simeon, our eyes have seen God's salvation which God has prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light and glory for God's people....fire, wind, mountains, trees, birds and cattle praise God....the writer of 3rd Isaiah asks a fair question: How can we keep silent?

Praise indeed feels like the right response in return for all the good things God has given to us. Just to sing, just to dance, just to point to the beauty of the star. Just to say, I don't know what to say and just to sing...

My life flows on in endless song; Above earth's lamentation, I hear the sweet, tho' far-off hymn

That hails a new creation ;Thro' all the tumult and the strife I hear the music ringing; It finds an echo in my soul— How can I keep from singing? What tho' my joys and comforts die? The Lord my Saviour liveth; What tho' the darkness gather round? Songs in the night he giveth.

No storm can shake my inmost calm While to that refuge clinging; Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth, How can I keep from singing? I lift my eyes; the cloud grows thin; I see the blue above it; And day by day this pathway smooths, Since first I learned to love it, The peace of Christ makes fresh my heart, A fountain ever springing; All things are mine since I am his— How can I keep from singing?

The authorship of this lovely hymn may be uncertain but we know its first appearance came around the time of the American Civil War. We also know that one of its early titles was "Always Rejoicing." Don't you find that fact a little weird? Who starts up a song like that while families divide against themselves, and widows and orphans are multiplied as bloody bodies are strewn across the fields where bright gardens might have grown?

We don't know who exactly but maybe somebody a little like the prophet or the psalmist or like Anna and Simeon, two old fools by today's measure, who went to the temple praising God at the fullness of time - like the prophet aware of Israel's brutal life in exile and witness still to so much oppression, sadness and longing of a people who had walked in deep darkness yet prophet enough with the grace and the nerve to bring good news, to be and bear with broken hearts and to proclaim liberty and peace to those who'd been grieving for life and for home for far too long. The call to rejoice where destruction, poverty, injustice and alienation had held sway is not starry-eyed and silly; it was the prophet's serious call to Israel to claim the truth of their identity in God. And that call- it finds an echo in our soul here in this hour as we find ourselves for who we really are in light of who Jesus Christ is.

As the commercial holiday rush is over now, and all we had so looked forward to is apparently past, and we soon go about the grim work of stripping our houses of their Christmas lights, we no less identify ourselves -as Christmas carries on through Epiphany- in light of the deep dignity bestowed on us by God. Scholar of Psalms James Luther Mays well observes that "the LORD has given the faithful praise as their dignity and power." Sun and moon, shining stars, highest heavens, waters above the heavens, sea monsters and all deeps, fire and hail, stormy wind, mountains and all hills, fruit trees and cedars, wild animals, cattle, creeping things and flying birds, princes, kings and working class, young and old together- all that breathe- composed as

they are of so much stardust, hope for the best, breath of God and light-all that breathe, all that moves can't help but praise God. And God has raised up a horn- a sign of power and strength but not as the world gives. God has raised up a horn of inner peace, of whole- hearted courage and grace found in belonging to God for the people who are close to him. For all people, for the whole creation. Praise the Lord!

Who cannot keep from singing? Even the psalmist- witness to the grief and rage of a people utterly bereft, as sung in lament just eleven psalms back in the canonized book we hold. "By the rivers of Babylon- there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion...our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked us for mirth...But how could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"

Nonetheless the song rings on in conspicuous praise...praise, the teacher of a poverty- stricken young woman...praise, the notes by which Mary learned how to sing, "Let it be, for my soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God."

As in a few days' time, I go south to do the work of a hospital chaplain on a full-time basis, I am heartened and encouraged by the fact that so many of you so often ask about my work, wish me well and assure me of your prayers. Thank you. So much. Without this, I would just fall apart. Thank you.

My upcoming position also reminds me of the difference between what many people think chaplains do and what chaplains actually do. Some people think we cheer people up which I'm afraid we hardly ever do, for the gravity of our patients' and families' immediate predicaments is not often very accommodating to cheer per se. But don't forget there is a difference between cheer and praise...praise, the defiant depth of joy.

Some people think we run around all day, slapping a prayer on things. I have pondered that too from time to time, and I've realized that some days, it feels like if I have visited eight rooms, I've said at least eight prayers alongside the occupants of said rooms. But then there are those days when I come to the end and realize I haven't said a single prayer except under my own breath in the depths of my heart and only by the power of the Spirit's sighs too deep for words.

What, when I have had nothing to say? What, when all I could do was just to *just* stand there and behold the humanity before me, the depth of their grief, the beauty and goodness of their love and the truth that no darkness could overcome it? What?!

It occurs to me that there in those holiest of moments, I got lucky enough to bear witness to the inner core of praise. And many times, I could hardly bear the sight but thanks be to God, I didn't look away. Let your gaze itself be your confession of faith, let your gaze itself be your song...as you behold the image of God in the person right before you. For what is praise but insistence on the reality of the goodness of the unfathomable gift and promise of our lives, of our life in God, insistence in the face of all that threatens to undo us on the enduring hope of beauty, light, the redemption of all things in which through such praise we are called into participation by the Lord of life himself? Be a fool and sing that song!

Praise takes guts in a time when a demoniac hellbent on crushing the weak and the poor is the leader of our country, praise demands vision when all seems lost in the hours of grief that follow the last goodbye, and praise bursts out into soulful song even from the depths of struggle where black boys are beat into disfigurement while handcuffed on the pavement down in Alabama.

Praise is God's gift to God's people- *our dignity and power* in the morning after the long night of waiting and walking through the dark. Praise comes....

Praise is no light and fluffy thing. Praise is the heart's inclination to beat in keeping with the thrust of the universe whose nature is to magnify the glory, the beauty of the one in whom we live and move and have our being, the one who breathes on all the breath of life, the one in whom we die and in whom nevertheless forever we hope and by whom we bear hope to the world.

One morning in the hospital, I received report from the overnight chaplain who was headed home for the day as my day was just beginning. He highlighted an urgent case on one of my primary units, the Adult Neurosciences ICU. The case he described was familiar to me by now- a person too young with no hope of recovery following a spontaneous subarachnoid hemorrhage- a head full of blood for no real rhyme or reason. This case felt different though 1) because the woman at the center of it was 39 years old; I was 38 at the time. 2) because this one had gone very quickly; there would be no lingering on life support; her husband understood the extent to which she was already gone, their pastor had been with them on arrival the night before and extended family were saying their goodbyes in turn. And 3) because she was the mother of an eight-year- old boy and an eleven- year-old girl and it was almost Mother's Day.

I took a deep breath, looked at her chart, gathered details and took notes. She had gone to a conference for work, had a couple of glasses of wine, by all accounts seemed happy and well but then cried out about the worst headache she ever had, threw up, fell down and now she was on my unit without another word.

I did not want to go up there. Too terrifying, too dreadful. How could I sing the Lord's song....? But, "Lord," I prayed, "let my gaze itself be my confession. And maybe somehow just enough..."

I met her husband in the hallway just outside her room. A prayer would have been a slap in the face to him, I had no words but I touched him, *I saw* him and stood beside him while together we watched their little girl paint her mother's nails one last time.

A little child shall lead them. I've heard that one a time or two this season. The thing about this human story that strikes me deepest is the fact that nobody persuaded that little girl to paint her mother's nails before it was time to go. It wasn't necessary but it *had to happen*. It could not be contained. This stunning, holy act sprung from her own great, deep heart of love.

As I walk along with my dog now months later, I think about her. I won't say she was uniquely brave or kind, I couldn't read her heart that closely. I only know what I saw- in silence, a loud ringing movement of acceptance, defiance and love. Acceptance of all that was brutally wrong- they'd leave without their mother on this day, defiance- in the face of death, with radiant strokes of beauty she knew were her mother's favorite colors, and just...so much love.

The real work of a chaplain, the real work of a Christian, the real work of a lover of God, the real work of a human being is to discern through the cacophony of flood, fire, hurt, hate, grief, stunning loneliness and loss- the notes by which we might yet sing the Lord's song in a foreign land. This is our dignity and our power, the gifts of God for the people of God. Beauty, glory. The music by which we join the whole creation...

Today, like every other day, the poet Rumi wrote, we wake up empty and frightened.

Don't open the door to the study and begin reading.
Take down a musical instrument.
Let the beauty we love be what we do.
There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.

It isn't always easy. It isn't always even necessary- it's foolish!- but may you find it cannot be contained. May you be blessed with the vision and the voice that give birth to praise. May you dance and find you cannot keep from singing, come what may and wherever you may be. And may you claim the dignity of your feet and the power and beauty in your voice even to lead the dance and sing the song where others still wait in the dark.

Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen.