

Christmas Eve/Day Yr B, 24-25/12/2020

Ps 96; Ps 98; Lk 2:8-20

Pastor Garth Wehrfritz-Hanson

“Sing to the LORD”

Both Psalm 96 and 98, along with Luke’s Christmas Gospel, highlight a similar theme—namely, that of singing, making music, joyfully praising God.

My NRSV *Lutheran Study Bible* (p. 849), identify Psalms 96 and 98 as hymns of praise, and Psalm 96 is also regarded as an enthronement psalm—a hymn praising God as King over all nations and all of creation. Psalm 96, along with several other psalms, does not have a title. However, my *Lutheran Study Bible* gives it this title: “Praise to God Who Comes in Judgement.” And it gives Psalm 98 a similar title: “Praise the Judge of the World.” The Good News Bible titles Psalm 96 like this: “God the Supreme King,” and Psalm 98 has this title: “God the Ruler of the World.” The Good News Bible also makes reference to 1 Chronicles 16:23-33 in relation to Psalm 96. The 1 Chronicles passage is a psalm of thanksgiving on the occasion of David bringing God’s ark to Jerusalem—although biblical scholars believe that the Chronicler wrote this psalm sometime after the Babylonian exile. If you compare Ps 96 with the 1 Chronicles passage, you will discover that they are pretty much the same psalm, almost word-for-word. And if you compare the first and last verses of Psalm 96 and 98, you will discover that they too are very similar. They both begin with these words: “O sing to the LORD a new song.” They both end with exactly the same words in the Good News Bible’s rendering of the last verse: “He (God) will rule the peoples of the world with justice and fairness.” In both of these psalms we also have the similar theme of making music to the LORD running through them. Indeed, human beings, waters of the sea, trees of the forest, hills, all of creation are summoned to make a joyful noise to the LORD.

What better time to make music and joyfully sing than now, at Christmas time, to celebrate with the army of angels and the shepherds, Mary and Joseph, all peoples of the earth, and all creation, the birth of Jesus our Saviour!

Martin Luther loved music, and had a lot of insights into the influence of music on our lives: Music is one of the loveliest and most glorious gifts of God. Satan hates it because it has great power to dispel temptations and evil thoughts. The devil does not wait on this lady. Music is one of the finest arts. The music makes the words live.

Music is the best balm for a sad heart, for it restores contentment and quickens and refreshes the heart.

'Sing unto the LORD a new song; sing unto the LORD all the earth!' for God has made our hearts and minds joyful through His beloved Son whom He gave for us and for our redemption from sin, death, and the devil.<sup>1</sup>

A century after Luther, the French scientist, and writer, Blaise Pascal had this to say: "The people who have the greatest influence in shaping the hearts and minds of any generation are not the folks who write the laws, but those who write the songs."

Then, later in the 17<sup>th</sup> and into the 18<sup>th</sup> century, God also made the heart and mind of J.S. Bach, one of the most gifted musicians who ever lived, to worship and praise God with his compositions by crediting God as the Source of his inspiration with the letters SDG or the words: *Soli Deo Gloria*, to God alone the glory.

I can remember when I was a teenager, our Luther League would go out Christmas carolling and sing to the senior members of our congregation. Not only did that singing bring joy and cheer to the hearts and lives of our senior members; it also brought joy and blessings to us Luther League members. Over the years, I've also sang in choirs, and continue to do so today in retirement. Music and singing continues to bless me with joy and peace, a content state of being.

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<sup>1</sup> *Day By Day We Magnify Thee: Daily Readings for the Church Year Selected from the Writings of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), p. 202.

According to Victoria Meredith, a University of Western Ontario professor who used the school's adult choirs as a "live research lab," participation in choral music leads to increased respiratory function, improved overall health, a heightened immune system and improved brain function.

Meredith also concludes that performing in a choir "can keep you younger and healthier for longer," pointing to similar studies that found people who sing on a regular basis require fewer doctors' visits, are less prone to falls, don't need as much medication, and are less likely to be depressed.

Put simply, group singalongs may offer the benefits of exercise without the humiliation of Spandex.

"Just as in general physical exercise, optimal results are seen when a singer exercises their vocal muscles at least three times a week for at least 20 minutes at a time," says Meredith, who has worked with the Canadian Centre for Aging Activity.

"A heavy workout one day is usually best followed by either a light workout or vocal rest the following day."

"Individual participant responses [to Meredith's research] included such comments as: 'Singing keeps my mind more agile,' 'Singing increases the amount of joy in my life' 'My breathing is better—even after lung surgery.'"

Though Meredith remarks that many of the documented benefits of singing are "of a psychological nature, related to being part of a group with shared goals," researchers have also discovered compelling evidence for physical advantages. The disease-fighting protein (slg A), for example, was found to increase by 150 per cent during choir rehearsals and 240 per cent during performances.<sup>2</sup> In light of this research, and in response to God's Word in our psalms, and our gospel, I encourage you to sing often, to ward off all of the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual afflictions that threaten you because of COVID-19.

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<sup>2</sup> Misty Harris, "Singing in a choir can keep you young, researcher says," *Edmonton Journal*, Saturday, January 5, 2008, page A16.

So, today, for your health and well-being, in response to the angelic message, and along with the army of angels and the humble shepherds, may we sing to the LORD as we celebrate the best Good News of all: "to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord."

In closing, let us express our joy and gratitude for God's greatest gift, Jesus, by singing the familiar carol written by one of the most prolific hymn writers of all time, Charles Wesley: Hark! The herald angels sing, "Glory to the new-born king;/peace on earth, and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled."/ Joyful, all you nations, rise; join the triumph of the skies;/with angelic hosts proclaim, "Christ is born in Beth-le-hem!"/Hark! The herald angels sing, "Glory to the new-born king!" (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, #270) Amen!