

A Singing Church

Psalm 100, James 5: 13

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Years ago when I was a youth pastor during my seminary years, one of the young people in the church I served asked, "Why do we have to sing every Sunday morning? Why not just show up for church on Sunday, listen to the pastor's sermon and go home?" I had to admit that he had a point. Our worship songs and even the choir's anthems were none too exciting. Sometimes they sounded more like funeral dirges. The congregational hymns were hard to sing with the lyrics so archaic that I doubt anyone could understand them, especially the young people. So the question was and is, "Why do we sing on Sunday mornings when we gather for worship?" The book of James provides us with the answer. In just one verse, in fact, just one half of a verse he says, "Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise." In other words as the author of this beloved gospel song tells us, "I sing because I'm happy, I sing because I'm free, for His eye is on the sparrow and I know He watches me." Indeed throughout the centuries that's one of, if not the most important reason why God's people have been singing. They are happy because God is watching over them.

For example, consider what happened when God delivered His people from pharaoh's army. Having walked safely through the waters of the Red Sea and then having seen all of the Egyptians who were pursuing them washed away, the Israelites began singing for joy. Moses led the song and Miriam his sister and all the women joined in with tambourines and dancing, singing, "Sing to the Lord, for He is highly exalted. The horse and the rider He has hurled into the sea" (Exodus 15:21). Then centuries later, when the Jewish people were able to return from their exile in Babylon to repair the walls of the city of Jerusalem there was another time of rejoicing. Nehemiah, who was the governor, had ordered the people to rebuild the walls to protect them from their enemies. They labored tirelessly, completing the task in record time. When they had finished it was time to celebrate. Two choirs of singers and musicians were formed. They along with the people of Jerusalem met on top of the city's restored walls. Then heading off, one to the right and the other to the left, the choirs and the people marched all the way around the city in opposite directions until they met at the Temple where the celebration continued, singing, rejoicing and giving thanks unto the Lord. In Nehemiah's account of the celebration

it concludes with these words, "And on that day they offered great sacrifices, rejoicing because God had given them great joy. The women and children also

rejoiced. The sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away" (Nehemiah 12:43).

These are but two examples of the fact that the Jewish people loved to sing and praise the Lord. Their songs were filled with joy because they knew that the Lord was watching over them. Indeed, the psalm that was read this morning is a reflection of that fact. God's people are encouraged to shout for joy and to come before the LORD with joyful songs because "it is He (God) who made us, and we are His; we are His people and the sheep of His pasture" (Psalm 100:3). In other words, just as King David stated in Psalm 23, God was their shepherd, watching over and protecting His flock just like a good shepherd watches over and protects the sheep that have been entrusted into His care. That was, indeed, a reason for joyful praise.

The desire to joyfully praise the Lord was within the very heart and soul of the Jewish people. There was a choir and orchestra that led the people in worship at the Temple in Jerusalem, dating all the way back to the days of their beloved King David, the sweet singer of Israel. When the Jewish people made their pilgrimages to the holy city, they broke out in song. In the book of Psalms, the song book of the Old Testament, there is a whole section devoted to "Songs of Ascent," Psalms 120-134. These songs of encouragement and praise would be sung as the people climbed the pathways and roads leading up to the city of Jerusalem.

We should not be surprised, therefore, to discover that singing was a part of the life of the early church. Writing to the Christians in Ephesus, Paul tells the congregation to "speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ" (Ephesians 5:19-20). This desire to sing was even recognized by the Roman authorities who arrested Christians. One of them noted in his correspondence that "on an appointed day they had been accustomed to meet before daybreak, to recite a hymn antiphonally to Christ as a god."

So what should all of this say to us this morning? There are a number of things. First, singing has been a part of Christianity from its beginning. It grew out of the Jewish faith from which it was born. Here's something that you may not have known. Guess what Jesus and His disciples did on the last night of His life? After celebrating the Passover in the Upper Room, the Scriptures tell us, "When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives" (Matthew 26:30). After that last meal and before that time of prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus and His disciples sang a song. It was a part of their religious traditions which the early church eagerly embraced. As noted by the Roman authorities, singing was a part of the early church's worship services.

Second, singing in the early church featured a multitude of musical expressions. That is what Paul stated in his letter to the Ephesians. He told them to sing a variety of songs—psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Psalms probably referred to the psalms in the Old Testament. Hymns and spiritual songs may have referred to songs that the early church had created to honor the Lord Jesus Christ, such as that well known passage of Scripture in Philippians 2:6-11, which describes both His humility and His exaltation. For us this means that we should sing songs which are taken directly from the Scriptures as well as songs which we have written and created on our own. This includes a wide variety of songs from stately hymns which focus our attention upon the attributes of God, like “Holy, Holy, Holy” and “Immortal, Invisible” to those livelier tunes which talk about our personal relationship with the Lord such as “Blessed Assurance.”

I still remember what a fellow minister said about the various kinds of music he had witnessed in the churches where he served. In some he said the music was solemn and stately, played on large pipe organs that filled the sanctuary with majestic hymns of praise. In others the pianists were enthusiastically engaged in a gospel song such as “Life is Like a Mountain Railroad.” He expected that at any moment the piano would go, “toot, toot,” and roll right out the front door. In other words there’s room for all kinds of musical expressions from the formal to the contemporary, with this one caveat, the third thing we should always remember and celebrate.

As James so adroitly declares, “Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise.” Our lives as well as our worship services should be filled with songs of happiness, songs of joy, songs of praise, because we serve a God who loves us and who is watching over us. If you will remember, I began this sermon by reciting the chorus from this beloved gospel song, “I sing because I’m happy, I sing because I’m free, for His eye is on the sparrow and I know He watches me.” Let me share with you the story behind this song. In the spring of 1905, Civilla Martin and her husband were visiting with friends, an elderly couple in Elmira, New York. Both the husband and his wife were in poor health. She had been bedridden for twenty years and he was a cripple who had to get around in a wheel chair. Nevertheless, they were cheerful Christians who loved the Lord. Civilla’s husband commented on the bright hopefulness that was so evident in their lives and asked for the secret to their joyfulness. The wife immediately answered, “His eye is on the sparrow and I know he watches me.” The testimony of that couple’s joyous faith inspired Civilla. Years earlier she had been a music teacher. Based upon those words and from the passages in Scripture in the Gospels from which they were derived, she wrote the song which we still love to hear and sing, “His Eye Is on the Sparrow,” a poignant reminder that the reason for our joy and happiness is a loving Savior who is watching over us.