

“Preaching to the Choir” Psalm 96

There may not be a more frightening phrase in the church then, “I would like to teach you a brand new song” other than maybe, “We’re going to take up a second offering.” And I understand. Honest I do. There is a familiarity, a comfort even, in hearing and singing songs that are known to us, especially songs your parents, grandparents and even further back have sung. So it’s unsettling to be asked to not just listen but sing along to a “brand new song”. But that’s exactly what the Psalmist of Psalm 96 asks us to do.

Allyson invited us all last week to add a coronation hymn, to our psummer playlist, and just in case you haven’t done this yet... I’m inviting you once again to make sure such a psong gets added to whatever technology you are using to play your mp3’s. But even though Psalm 96 appears to be, at a glance, yet another coronation hymn (one of five psalms classified as Enthronement Psalms) it is also so much more. And the opening call to sing a “new song” does not necessarily elicit a song with fresh lyrics or unfamiliar music, but a song with “universal scope”. So I guess I’m not just asking that you add a coronation hymn to your psummer playlist but a “new” psong everyone can sing. But don’t be alarmed if the song has a familiar ring to it because the words of Psalm 96:7-9 are almost identical to Psalm 29:1-2. (You can look it up later) It is even possible that Psalm 96 borrowed this section from Psalm 29 - with one major difference. Psalm 29 is set in the heavenly realm with its call for the heavenly beings to ascribe glory to God, while Psalm 96 addresses those gathered in the earthly realms and invites all humankind to “ascribe” strength and glory to the Lord and to offer in his courts worship that is appropriate for the sovereign God.

So maybe the image we need to have this morning is not simply a psong psung in the confines of our sanctuary but a psong psung within the community we live because that’s the “real” context of our Psalm this morning. I say this because according to 1 Chronicles 16, when David brought the ark (that is the holy box that housed the ten commandments and a few other cherished mementos) to Jerusalem, he appointed Asaph and other Levites (or priests) to sing praises to God as they walked and carried the ark, which included the words of Psalm 96 (minus the opening line and a few others -- see 1 Chronicles 16:22-33. In short, the Chronicler suggests the possibility that major portions of Psalm 96 was “new song” called for in Psalm 96:1. So here is the image that I want us to picture as we think on the words of Psalm 96. God (and not just the ark) is in the midst of the community as God travels through the streets of Jerusalem and people on the streets are invited to sing along. Those inviting others to sing are called here: evangelists. Evangelism is from the word the Greek word evangelion which literally means “good news.” So this is why James Luther, for example calls Psalm

96 not just an “Enthronement Psalm” but an “Evangelical” Psalm.” Mays writes, “In a world threatened by chaos, the vision evoked by Psalm 96 is indeed ‘good tidings.’” Given the world wide injustice that makes so many miserable, the nations need to hear the good news that the God of Israel is coming to “judge the earth... in righteousness and the peoples in his truth.” So, adds Theodore Maccarenhas, Psalm 96 is actually “missionary in character and... it imposes a missionary function upon Israel” (and us). Psalm 96 calls each of us then to “take (the good) news of God’s wonders to one and all” (96:3) But then again this should not surprise us.

When Jesus met fishermen on the shore of Galilee so many years ago and said “Follow me” notice they followed without question. Each of the gospel writers have nearly the same reaction to Jesus’ call, the disciples “left everything and followed.” None asked what we think we would have asked if put in a similar position like “Who are you?” or “Where are we going?” for example. Instead these men (and later women) simply followed. Or when Jesus met the women at the empty tomb did the resurrected Jesus say, “Now you will see your loved ones in heaven – relax and do not fear? No! He said, “Why are you standing around? Why are you looking for the living among the dead? Go and tell!” And when Jesus was given the opportunity to share one final word with his disciples (who to be honest messed up things more than they helped) prior to Jesus’ return to Heaven did Jesus tell the disciples to set up shop and buy land because location location location matters? No! Instead Jesus said something like, Get out of here! “Go and make disciples!” “I’m not just settling on Judea but beyond Judea because the whole world belongs to me so go to the entire world.

We’ve been trying to “grow a church” here at KesPres for about 20 years now. We’ve waited patiently for you to come through these doors and you finally came. Some of you wandered into the Ice Palace when we were just a handful. Others of you arrived since we built this beautiful building and we were a little bigger. And I know there will be others who will stumble across us, but can I be honest with you? There are not as many looking nowadays. Now that’s not to say people aren’t looking for something. There may not be a time in history when more are searching, than right now – it’s just not 40 years ago when people moved into a community they looked for a bank, a doctor, a dentist, a good school and a church. Self help sections and spirituality sections in local bookstores have never been so popular. People are searching, believe me, it’s just that they don’t know what they are searching for. But I will tell you what they are not searching for. They are not searching for a church and even more a church that has no, “good news” to share.

Evangelism has been a theme here at KesPres, even more intentionally, for over a year now. It began with a beautiful map that was creatively done by a few women at our church (that you can see at the front) with really only one simple phrase, “Disciples making disciples.” It’s why Allyson and I

preached through the Book of Acts and our study groups looked at the Book of Acts along with Francis Chan's book, "Multiply." Is it starting to ring a bell? For the Season of Lent we invited you to participate, as we often do, in our Lenten Project, but remember we didn't ask you to raise "money" but "hours," serving in the community. Sound familiar? We wanted to remind you that together we are the hands and feet of Christ here as we "Rewrite the Story of our Community." Now you remember, right? We invited you to incarnate Christ in the community God loves even more than we do. And as we did these things slowly the community began to change as many of you shared your story, your testimony, of where you served whether it be driving for the cancer society, coaching, helping in a local school, knitting for the local hospital or serving at a community meal or community shelter. In fact a large and unexpected donation came into KesPres from someone who saw and experienced this outreach ministry and wanted to help. And all these things happened because we did not sing a familiar tune but a new song.

Pastor, teacher and author Will Willimon describes evangelism in a way that I'd never heard. Like me, when you hear the word evangelism chances are you imagine people on street corners with placards reading, "Jesus Saves" but Willimon instead describes evangelism as "the way God gets what God wants" which is namely humanity (us). He goes onto to say, "Evangelism is the way we join with God" - join with what is close to God's heart. So the question should not be whether we should or shouldn't evangelize (that is – join with God to share His good news to win others to Christ) because it would be like saying, "Should we or shouldn't we worship God"? The answer of course to both questions is obvious and unequivocal – Worship and sharing our faith is what we have been called to do. It is our mandate, the mandate of all those who claim a love for Jesus. I'm not sure when and where things changed but I have a feeling it occurred when the world made its way into the church rather than the other way around. When the world told us to "Stop preaching" we stopped. When the school told our kids, "That may be true for you but it's not true for me," we listened. When society declared, "All gods are the same", we became silent. And suddenly faith became only a personal matter – something between you and God alone. And a generation was lost. Until now. The Psalmist says, "Take the news of God's glory to the lost." In other words give a name to the God who his enthroned in the heavens. Declare to the nations who is the God who rules and reigns.

Athens was one of the most religious cities in first century Palestine. Idols, statues and monuments littered the streets. If you wanted rain go stand by the statue to the "god of rain" and pray. If you needed sun, fall prostrate before the "sun good" and seek his help. Every god, for every possible situation could be found in Athens. But instead of criticizing the Athenians naivety the Apostle Paul recognized one lone "un-named" statue with a simple inscription below: "To the

Unknown God.” (Acts 17:16-34) You see the Athenians were so religious (or some might say so irreligious) that they left nothing to chance and made one additional statue to make sure they did not accidentally miss a god. Paul, on one of his missionary trips, saw this stature but also saw this as a great opportunity to introduce an entire community to the God that was believed to be unknown but in truth was known. The God who made the heaven and the earth, the God who did not give up on a peoples who constantly turned their back on God, the God who display who showed great grace and even greater love, the God who did not remain distant but came near and became one of us, the God who saved us from ourselves and did for us what we could not to ourselves, the God who loved us enough to die for us, to take our place, the God who revealed Himself to you and transformed and continues to transform your life giving you purpose and meaning that you could get from nowhere else is in fact knowable. Is this not a message the world needs to hear? One of my favorite preachers, Barbara Brown Taylor, once described preaching as trying to “toss the fragile net of our words over the bone-melting music of God.” This is Psalm 96, the “Evangelistic Psalm”

But understand this song is not for those who think their lives are all in order. This song is not for those who are only thankful and celebrate the fact they are in and everyone else is out. This song is not for those who can't see the image of God, especially in those who are different than them. This song is not for those who sit in the comfort and security of the church and are afraid to leave. This song is not for those who do not have a heart for the outsider, the stranger among us. And this song is not for those who simply want to sing the same song over and over and over again. No, this song is for those who go out from this place bold and unashamed to make God knowable.

But I'm not telling you anything you don't already know. I'm preaching to the choir, right? The choir who sings a new song to God but also a new song sung to those outside of this place - on our streets, in our neighbourhoods, in our grocery stores, our places of work – to those who do not know the psong yet, but they soon will because we have taught them the psing a brand new psong to our God! Thanks be to God!