

“Make a Joyful Noise”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
November 6, 2016 – All Saints’ Day

**Psalm 98**

Ten years ago, I preached a sermon on the rich young ruler coming to Jesus and being told he had to sell all his possessions in order to enter the Kingdom of God. I began that sermon by saying:

These are the phrases of impossibility. “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” “When pigs fly.” “When hell freezes over.” “When the Chicago Cubs win the World Series.”

I guess the events of this past week simply reinforce one of our tenets of faith: That with God, all things are indeed possible!

When I read Psalm 98 Thursday morning – on very little sleep, I might add – I could not help but think of the great celebrations that were going on in the city of Chicago. “Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; With trumpets and the sound of the horn; Let the sea roar; Let the floods clap their hands, let the hills sing together for joy.” It is at times of great exuberance and celebration that psalms of praise like this one most definitely speak to us in clear, unambiguous ways. It’s in those moments of happiness that we wish to say to God: “Thank you! You are great!” And I’m sure that’s what many Cubs fans were saying early-Thursday morning!

I’ve always thought of the Psalms as the songbook of Scripture. They are the collection of poetry that sings the faith in all different situations and for so many generations of believers. Many of the Psalms are attributed to King David, and give words to the faithful in all times of life. They give thanks to God, they cry out to God, they discern God’s presence, and they offer praise to God. Throughout the Jewish and Christian traditions, the Psalms have been set to music, as so many of them speak of praising God with various forms of song and instrument. The Psalms provide us a wealth of theological understanding about who God is, who we are as God’s children, and how we understand our calling to live faithfully in this world God has created.

The psalm we have read this morning – Psalm 98 – is often called “an enthronement psalm”, symbolizing God’s omnipotent rule over this world. The psalm speaks to God’s might and power, “for he has done marvelous things.” The psalmist speaks to God’s providence over his people Israel, through wars and conflicts with other nations, reminding the Israelites that, “God’s right hand and his holy arm have gotten him victory. The Lord has made known his victory; he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations” (98:1-2). God’s steadfast love has not waned, and even the ends of the earth are witnesses to God’s awesome deeds.

One commentary I read noted that these opening verses of Psalm 98 remind the reader of God's providence and care through two major events in the life of Israel: the exodus from Egypt, and the return of the exiles from Babylon. "In effect, both events are revelatory of God's basic character, which is best summarized by the word pair 'steadfast love and faithfulness'" (New Interpreter's Bible, Volume 4, Abingdon Press, Nashville, © 1996: 1072). Through these life-changing events in Israel's life, God's very essence is stated clearly and unequivocally to his people.

It is because of this recognition of God's steadfast love and faithfulness that the people are called to praise God. And the psalmist speaks to the multitude of ways God's people might offer that praise. By joyous song we sing praise to God. By the lyre and the sound of melody we offer praise to God. With trumpets and the sound of the horn we offer praise to God (98:4-6). And in all these ways – both then and now – we are testifying to God's steadfast love and faithfulness to the world around us. That is why we worship on Sundays, on special occasions, and on every day we are blessed to live on this earth.

This praise and thanksgiving is not limited to the people of Israel, or to the church today. It is heard in all of God's creation. As I read the end of Psalm 98, I could not help but think of being at the ocean, or being back home in the mountains of West Virginia, or being in the midst of a thunderstorm – and knowing God is present in my life. "Let the seas roar . . . Let the floods clap their hands . . . Let the hills sing together for joy" (98:7-8). The whole creation knows who God is, knows of God's steadfast love and faithfulness, and so the creation responds in thanksgiving. "Psalm 98 is a witness, therefore, to a God whose choice of a particular people, and whose activity on their behalf, are for the ultimate purpose of fulfilling God's purposes for the whole creation" (ibid).

Psalm 98 not only speaks to God's providence in the past, but it also professes a faith in God's coming kingdom. All of our praise of God is rooted in God's steadfast love and faithfulness, which will be made manifest in what is to come: "For God is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness and the peoples with equity" (98:9). The psalmist calls on the Israelites – and us – to trust in God's current and future reign. It is a reign that we as Christians believe is embodied in the form of Emmanuel, God with Us – Jesus Christ our Lord.

Perhaps that connection between Psalm 98 and God's coming reign are nowhere more evident than in a familiar carol we sing at Christmas. Isaac Watts did not intend for "Joy to the World" initially to be sung at Christmas. Watts wrote this familiar hymn based on Psalm 98, and if you listen to the verses, you most definitely can hear the psalmist's words:

*Joy to the world, the Lord is come!  
Let earth receive her king;  
let every heart prepare him room,  
and heaven and nature sing.*

*Joy to the earth, the Savior reigns!  
Let all their songs employ,  
while fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains  
repeat the sounding joy.*

*He rules the world with truth and grace,  
and makes the nations prove  
the glories of his righteousness  
and wonders of his love.  
("Joy to the World," Isaac Watts, 1719)*

And it's not only at Christmas that we will make a joyful noise by singing Psalm 98. It also is during the other major celebration in our lives as Christians. Often, during the Easter season, Psalm 98 is read to remind us that God's sovereign claim upon the world was made manifest in Christ's death and resurrection. "This rhythm of liturgical use is a reminder that the incarnation, the crucifixion, and the resurrection together proclaim the good news that God so loves the world and that together they portray a divine sovereignty manifest, not as sheer force, but as sheer love" (ibid, 1073).

Another way we know of God's grace and love is through the knowledge that God's eternal kingdom is made complete by the saints who have gone before us. Today we celebrate that by marking All Saints' Day, giving thanks to God for the believers who have taught us, loved us, and now live eternally with God.

On Wednesday, at the meeting of Whitewater Valley Presbytery, the Rev. Kathleen O'Connell of United Faith Presbyterian Church in Fort Wayne gave the meditation for worship. And she spoke of how it is around this table – the Lord's Table – that we as people of faith draw closer to God as the community of believers. It is around this table that we are spiritually fed, and are strengthened and inspired to proclaim to the world God's steadfast love and faithfulness.

When we gather around this table today, we are sharing a meal not only with one another, but also with God and with the saints who have gone before us. We eat this bread and drink this cup trusting that God's reign is real, God's love is true, and God's promises will never be broken. Indeed, as we will pray later in our service: "Give us strength to serve you faithfully until the promised day of resurrection, when with the redeemed of all the ages we will feast with you at your table in glory."

As we come to this table today, may we make a joyful noise to the world that our God's love is steadfast, and his faithfulness will never waver.

"O sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things!" Alleluia! Amen.