

Assembly Remarks on Singing Psalms With All Our Heart 2020

D: Hello, dear friends! I am Diane Jacobson.

P: And I am Paul Jacobson

D: We are here to talk about Singing Psalms with All of Your Heart. You are now all invited to laugh. Here we are on zoom, talking about singing, when that is precisely what we cannot do together.

P: So, in truth, we are here to remind ourselves of what it is we miss and why.

D: Why do we miss singing in church so much?

P: This is the first question we ask in our study guide that is now published on the synod website as well as on facebook and which we very much hope will stimulate a synod-wide conversation about Singing Psalms.

D: The guide centers around 7 questions, because we always do things in sevens!

In answering this question about why we miss singing in church, I realized once again how central singing is to my faith. I venture to say that singing is more my own personal spiritual language than prayer. I suggest we sing psalms for many and various reasons. Here is my list of reasons. Of course, I have 7 reasons!:

- One, we sing psalms because they are biblical, and the Bible is our Book of Faith, and thus they tie us deep within our tradition.**
- Two, we sing psalms because they are both our words to God and God's words to us.**
- Three, we sing psalms because of their deep variety in how we talk to God: with thanksgiving, in praise, through lament, and in confession – to name a few. Psalms so profoundly express our inmost longings, fear, and even despair as well as our greatest joys, surprises, and experiences of grace.**
- Four, we sing psalms because they tie us so deeply to others singing with us, past and present, and, the promise is, even to future generations.**
- Five, we sing psalms because we hear the voice of others. Including the voice of the nations, the underdog, the oppressed. In truth, we hear the voice of all creation singing -- sometimes in praise, sometimes in lamentation. We hear so many different calls for justice as a demand of the Lord.**

- Six, we sing psalms because of their poetry -- our conviction being that poetry often expresses truth in most profound ways. As the late great Ruth Bader Ginsburg, the notorious RBG, once wrote, “words can paint pictures.” How we say things inhabits and enriches our words. Indeed, when we speak poetically love is able to ring through our words and songs. Truth is expressed in ways that mere facts can never fully communicate.
- And the final and seventh reason that we sing psalms: We sing psalms with all our heart because they invite us into lives of discipleship.

Paul, would you like to add anything to this list.

P: I wouldn't dream of adding things to that prodigious list. I want to talk about why it is we sing psalms and not just say the Psalms, perhaps echoing some ideas from Diane's big list. Most important for me is how singing the psalms requires our whole attention as well as our physical energy and presence. Singing a psalm is a whole-person experience – mind, body, emotion, understanding, and so forth. And chanting a psalm in unison is, of course, a uniting experience. It bonds a choir or congregation in tone and in phrasing. It's not an individual sport; it's a team experience.

I would like us to do a time-travel experience: Let's throw ourselves back 2 ½ to 3 millenia and imagine ourselves in Israel, or maybe in Babylon. We have, perhaps, a picture of a solo psalmist, maybe David, sitting on a rock, harp in hand, strumming and singing Psalm 23 or some such. But now, imagine yourself as a pilgrim en route to the temple in Jerusalem – an annual excursion or, perhaps, something you've dreamt of for a life-time. You've been walking for a few days and are hot and tired. You join more and more other pilgrims, and gradually the song grows: “I lift my eyes to the hills” as you see the bright white temple shining on the hill in the far distance. “From where does my help come?” How can it be anything but sung – together? Perhaps you can imagine a melody or a repeating psalm tone. No instruments. Just voices.

Let's do a modern experiment. Let's take a 17th century Scottish tune from "Psalms of David, Edinburgh" and a text by 20th century poet, mentioned in the study guide, James L. Macbeth Bain – Brother James' Air, and learn the words, a paraphrase of Psalm 23. Not now, of course. But take time. Copy it from the ELW (778), memorize all 5 verses the way you memorized Psalm 23 when you were a kid. Now you have a traveling companion, a 5 -stanza beautiful hymn that can accompany you on walks and car rides and as you're going to sleep at night and need something peaceful in your mind. Join us – "The Lord's My shepherd...

Isn't it amazing how many of you could sing with us, by heart!? But now, though this is a Zoom experience, I want us to have an actual real live experience of singing together. Here is what we are going to do. We are going to sing together a new setting of Psalm 111 written by me for our experience here and now. A few of us recorded it at our church, Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in St. Paul, as if we were in worship (suitably distanced, of course). You will have the words, and even some of the music, in front of you to follow. It will be like "following the bouncing ball." As we often do in our congregations, we can all sing the antiphon, which is the first verse of the psalm. Listen to the choir the first time, and join in on the repeat and then whenever the whole antiphon pops up on the screen. A soloist will do the heavy lifting on the rest of the verses as we soak in the words and music.

We'll let the singing of the music speak for itself, but as with any musical adventure, it has an element of interpretation – moods, words, instrumentation, etc. One little example is that I wanted the word "Hallelujah" to have the emphasis, the weight, on the last syllable, "jah", because "Yah" is the shortened name of God, Yahweh. Handel puts the emphasis on Ahhhhhleluja. That's ok. It's catchy. But "jah" is important! Folks, we can have fun creating all kinds of new ways of singing the psalms in our congregation, some of them for the moment, and some, perhaps, long-lasting.

So, let's have some fun and worship and sing Psalm 111 together, praising Yah with all our heart!

RECORDING GOES HERE

P: That was fun! I wish I could have heard all your dulcet voices in beautiful unity.

D: That was fun! I am learning a truck load about the bad and good things about zoom. Sometimes we can form unexpected communities around common commitments and passions. As I said, we would love to have folks study singing Psalms With all Our Heart together. To that end, we have started a facebook group around our study. Anyone, any group can join as they wish – maybe even a choir group longing to do something together. And Paul and I commit to monitoring it regularly and joining in as people wish. We are learning how to do this as we go. So thanks for having us speak today and make sure that you continue to sing psalms with all your heart!

P: And blessings to you all!