***JOYFUL NOISE***

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Texts: Psalm 100 and 1 Peter 1:3-9

*Make a joyful noise to the Lord all the earth, worship the Lord with gladness, come into God’s presence with singing!* So sings the psalmist whose words inspire choirs to make joyful music to God with soaring songs of praise, but also invite the melodically challenged (and we know who we are) to join those songs with joyful noise. Joyful noise is at the heart of faithful worship. It raises heartfelt praise and offers thanksgiving with gratitude. The psalmist urges us to approach worship with vibrant enthusiasm, enthusiasm that escapes our lips in joyful noise – like the roar of a jubilant crowd. Some of you may find such noise a little unsettling in worship. Surely the *joyful noise* of the psalmist is more melodic than mere noise. Perhaps it is a glitch in the translation. Perhaps the psalmist meant “joyful melody.” Make a *joyful melod*y to the Lord!

Feel free to adopt that translation as your own, but know that the *joyful melody* is a *joyful noise*. The Hebrew words are rooted in ringing cries and roaring shouts, not pensive peeps or melodious murmurs. It is “Long live the King!” by which loyal subjects pay homage to their royal leader. It is praise drawn from a well deep in the human soul, praise that acknowledges dependence and gratitude for grace. It is that *joyful noise* we are urged by the psalmist to raise with glad worship and songs of praise, for God listens for the joyful noise of our lips and hearts and hands. In the words of the great theologian Karl Barth:

*The Christian community sings. It is not a choral society. Its singing is not a concert. But from inner, material necessity it sings….What we can say and must say quite confidently is that the community which does not sing is not the community.*

We are a Covenant community that sings. We sing because we need to express the joy that is ours by faith. We sing, not to impress or entertain, but to express our thanks and praise to God. Whether we lift a sweet melody or a soaring descant or just a joyful noise, the psalmist wants us to come into God’s presence with a song in our hearts and on our lips. Why? Because we are a people who have much for which to be joyful and that joy needs to find some expression!

If we offer muted praise instead of truly joyful noise perhaps it is because we take for granted what God has done for us. We take for granted each breath that we take, each day that dawns, each blessing that is graciously bestowed upon us. We take for granted the miracle of creation and the daily miracles of God’s providential care in our lives. We take for granted the cross and the empty tomb. If we do not raise a truly joyful noise, perhaps it is because we take for granted our God and are not moved to a joyful response. Not all worship is joyful noise, but is ANY of your worship joyful or noisy – or would you feel more at home in worship with a congregation of stoic mimes?

I remember one Sunday in my dad’s church in Slippery Rock we sang as our opening hymn the same hymn we sang this morning, *Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee.* We got about as far as hearts unfolding like flowers when suddenly Chet O’Bannon, the choir director at the church and at Slippery Rock University, shouted out, “*Stop! Stop!*” The organist stopped playing and everyone stopped singing. Chet walked out to the front of the chancel and said loudly, “I was watching you sing that hymn and this is what I saw, (in a dreary voice and with a dour expression), ‘Joyful, joyful, we adore thee.’ What kind of joy is that? You look like you’re at a funeral – or the dentist! Now, we are going to start over, and this time I want to hear you sing like you mean it and see some joy!” The second attempt was much more joyful with smiles all around, but by the next week, we were back to our old ways. If we were joyful, we were pretty good at hiding it!

Why do we find our joy so restrained? Do we have nothing to be joyful about, are we too self-conscious, or do we somehow think that our Puritan ancestors were right in saying, ”If it feels good, don’t do it, for it must be wrong”? In her book *Memories of God,* Roberta Bondi describes waking up one night to hear her own voice repeating the words of the Easter prayer, “*The joy of the Resurrection renews the whole world*.” Suddenly, she says, she knew that every cell in her body heard those words and knew them to be true and found healing for her heart long-broken; for the first time she recognized the overwhelming joy of Easter. With wonder she writes,

*How could I have been a church historian and a person of prayer who loved God and still not known that the most fundamental Christian reality is not the suffering of the cross but the life it brings?…The foundation of the universe for which God made us, to which God draws us and in which God keeps us is not death, but joy*.[[1]](#endnote-1)

Perhaps you are thinking, “Well, church historians are a little odd anyway,” but what Roberta Bondi was sharing was not some insight mined from the pages of a long-lost papyrus found in a cave somewhere. What she was sharing was her own experience, her own joyful moment of revelation, shared in the hope that we too may recognize the truth of those words and experience joy in our lives.

In his paraphrase of the 100th Psalm, Euguene Peterson suggests these opening words for the psalm: “*On your feet now – applaud GOD! Bring a gift of laughter, sing yourselves into God’s presence.*”[[2]](#endnote-2) What he is trying to capture is the full body experience of joy. Joy is not confined to our voices; it embraces our whole being as joy within us seeks openings to be expressed. As Poet Mary Oliver puts it:

*We shake with joy, we shake with grief.*

*What a time they have, these two*

*housed as they are in the same body*.[[3]](#endnote-3)

You may know what it is to shake with grief, with sobs that spill out in tremors that wrack your whole body. But do you know what it is to shake with joy, with unrestrained joy?

I daresay our brothers and sisters in the African-American Church are much better at expressing that kind of full-bodied joy than we are! We are far more restrained, which makes one wonder if we are less joyful. Is the good news somehow less good for us or are we just less willing to express it? It is remarkable that so many African-American spirituals express that joy so well, given the painful circumstances in which many of those songs were born. But then again, perhaps it is in those circumstances that God’s promises inspired so much joy!

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose life, death, and writings from a German prison camp bear witness to the high cost of discipleship, writes:

*…the Christian life is not one of gloom,*

*but of ever increasing joy in the Lord.[[4]](#endnote-4)*

He didn’t say ever-increasing contentment or comfort or peace, but joy! Where did he find joy amid the suffering all around him in that Nazi prison camp? He found it in the promises of Christ, promises that sustained him even in the valley of the shadow of death! Perhaps Talitha Arnold had Bonhoeffer in mind in noting:

*Joy comes where it has no business being.*

*Joy comes not from our deserving, but from God’s doing.[[5]](#endnote-5)*

Joy is more than happiness or pleasure. Joy is rooted in what God has done and is doing that enables us to face the world as it is with the promises of God that say:

*You are not alone. I am with you.*

*A better day, a glorious day, lies ahead.*

Joy is a companion of hope that sustains us through the darkest of nights. In the words of the psalmist:

*Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning.*

One of the great examples of joy comes to us in that classic, *A Christmas Carol*. As you may recall, Ebenezer Scrooge is a miserable tyrant, a tight-fisted miser who finds no good cheer in Christmas and no joy in giving. (In writing this I realized that the root of MISERABLE is MISER, but perhaps you already knew that.) After his visitation in the night by the three spirits of Christmas Past, Present, and Future, Scrooge is a changed man in the morning. A cheerful spirit and unrestrained joy replace his dour demeanor, he gives generously instead of hoarding selfishly, he shouts *Merry Christmas* instead of muttering *Bah, Humbug*! Folks think he has lost his mind, but we know that he is simply expressing a new-found joy that has erupted with him, joy that he had never known before – and it changed him.

We are called to be so changed, to live cheerful, joyful, generous lives, to be more like the new Scrooge and less like the old one, more like the shepherds who went back to their fields rejoicing after their visit to the stable, more like the wisemen who knelt in awe and offered their gifts, more like Mary who sang, “*My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my savior!*”, more like the women who raced back from the tomb to say, “*We have seen the Lord!*”, more like Easter people who shout, “*The Lord is risen! He is risen indeed!*” Christmas and Easter are seasons of great joy and hope, seasons full of joyful songs and soaring spirits, but our joy should not be confined to those seasons. Joy should mark our lives and life together, for the good news of those seasons is good news for all the seasons of the year and all the seasons of our lives.

*Joy to the World* was not written by Isaac Watts to be a Christmas carol. It was written to express every day joy, for the Lord has come among us bringing life, hope, peace, and joy – endless joy! So make a joyful noise to the Lord this day and tomorrow and the day after tomorrow and every day, for every day *is a day the Lord has made. Rejoice and be glad in it!* Amen

1. Roberta Bondi, *Memories of God* [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Euguene Peterson, “Psalm 100” in *The Message*, NavPress:2002, p.1035 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. “We Shake with Joy”, Mary Oliver in *Devotions*, Penguin Books:2017, p.70 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* quoted in *The Living Pulpit*, October-December 1996, p.32 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Talitha Arnold, quoted in *The Living Pulpit*, Id. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)