



GROWING TOWARD GOD IN WORSHIP: THE PRAISE OF GOD IN SONG Revelation 4:6-11; Matthew 21:9 April 5, 2020 Dr. Thomas E. Evans

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Colossians 3:16-17)

We sing in worship because scripture shows it is a central path to express our gratitude to God. It pleases God.

Every year I look forward to Palm Sunday. The procession of the children is truly an exultant moment in the life of the church. The sheer joy and exuberance delight my Spirit and give me a mere taste of what it might have been like for the crowd who actually saw Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem. Simply imagining standing on that road and waving the palms sends shivers down my spine.

This is the essence of our music in worship. It is a visceral, spontaneous eruption of joy that is born from being in the presence of our Lord, almost like an infant's squeal, an unthought eruption of delight. In fact, the "Hosanna" the crowd shouted to Jesus, expresses a primal plea, "Save!"

This is how the Presbyterian Book of Common Worship describes it,

With gladness, God is praised in song, for the gift of God's grace brings joy. The response may be an appropriate psalm, hymn, canticle (i.e., a biblical song other than a psalm), spiritual.

This gladness is perhaps most powerfully conveyed in the throne room of heaven described in Revelation chapters four and five. The scene conveys the most resplendent vision in all of scripture. There are trumpets, rainbows, fantastic beasts, torches, lightening, thunder, thrones covered in gold, 24 elders casting their crowns before the throne of God and a sea of glass. The worship begins with these four beasts singing

"Holy, Holy, Holy," then angels and elders numbering thousands upon thousands are added until finally reaching a crescendo. John tells us,

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing, 'To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might for ever and ever!' And the four living creatures said, 'Amen!' And the elders fell down and worshipped."

Our worship, indeed our very lives, are a dress rehearsal for this eternal praise that awaits us in heaven – just like waving those palm branches is our rehearsal for greeting Christ. That is what we are truly doing on Palm Sunday. We are practicing to meet our Lord and to do it with enthusiasm!

This makes the hymn, "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty!" the quintessential opening song of adoration, for its words are ripped straight from Revelation, expressing the Biblical act of praise with an ascendant power and joy. When the sopranos add the descant, for a moment, it sounds as if we have entered the very throne room of heaven!

Amid the adoration we are fed by this sublime heavenly vision spelled out in the hymn. Perhaps you have always wondered why, in this hymn, the elders are "casting down their golden crowns around the glassy sea." They are casting their crowns before the throne to acknowledge that God is Lord of all. The sea is by the throne and it is glassy because it is perfectly calm. This is a sign that all the forces of evil and chaos have been defeated.

During the time of coronavirus fears, such powerful vision and praise strengthens our confidence that, "This too shall be overcome!"

Every week we begin with a hymn of praise, for adoration is the keynote of all true worship – of the creature before the Creator, of the redeemed before the Redeemer. A trend adopted about 30

years ago shifted away from this focus of praise toward more theme-based worship. But this was a mistake. Worship, more than instructing us, is meant to be our gift to God.

This requires a dual emphasis in our singing. On the one hand, we want to offer God our very best. This means a choir that strives for excellence. They faithfully rehearse on a weekly basis to ensure quality in our gift. Holt works diligently to select appropriate anthems and all the worship staff consult in choosing our hymns. Working hard to ensure quality music and quality singing shows God we care enough to make the effort.

On the other hand, as Henry Van Dyke said, “Use what talents you possess; the woods would be very silent if no birds sang there except those that sang best.” The congregational singing is meant for ALL OF US to offer our voice.

The Reformed Church in America explains,
Singing is a ministry that belongs to all the people of God. The congregation is always the primary choir. The role of professional or volunteer choirs and musicians is to aid the whole people of God in their worship.

While our voice may not offer the most melodious sound, it is the heart with which we sing that our Lord measures. It gives God much delight to hear the faithful sing. We sing for the enjoyment of the Lord our God, not our auditory pleasure.

There is a profound difference, as you all well know, in the energy in the Sanctuary when everyone is singing!

In addition to the primary purpose of offering praise to the Lord, we sing to drive the truths of scripture deeper into our hearts and be swayed into more faithful action. John Calvin wrote,

... There is scarcely in the world anything which is more able to turn or bend this way and that the morals of men, as Plato prudently considered it. And in fact, we find by experience that it has a sacred and almost incredible power to move hearts in one way or another.

(Calvin, *Preface to the Genevan Psalter*)

The hymn, “My Shepherd Will Supply My Need,” makes me feel the shepherding love of God whenever I sing it. “What Child Is This,” with its gentle tune puts me at the foot of the manger. But, perhaps, no other hymn opens scripture to me than, “Were You There?”

It makes me feel,

Like I was there

to hear the nails pounded into his flesh;

like I was there,

to see them pierce him in his side;

like I was there,

when the sun refused to shine;

like I was there

when they laid him in the tomb.

The gasp of agony when you sing, “O . . . O . . . O!” indeed makes me tremble with terror, dread, and shock.

The power of singing strengthens our faith, gives us courage in times of fear, hope in despair, clarity of conviction in times of confusion, and divine joy in times of celebration.

If singing has the power to support the faithful, it also has the power to convert the doubtful. Paul sang in prison, which served as a testament to the others in prison with him. The text tells us they were listening. You never know, should someone hear you sing, how it might open God’s truth to them. Martin Luther said, “he must cheerfully sing and talk about this, that others might hear it and come to Christ.”

Finally, singing the faith has a supernatural power, that is a power by the Holy Spirit, to connect us not only to God but to one another. The YouTube videos of Italians singing from their balconies was incredibly heartening. Song ties people together across distances, across race, economics, and even faith.

For those of you who have been to the Community Thanksgiving Service, you know what I am talking about. There are many people I know, but usually hundreds of people I do not. Most every

year the closing hymn is, "Let there Be Peace on Earth." The words are incredibly powerful,

*Let there be peace on earth
And let it begin with me;
Let there be peace on earth,
The peace that was meant to be
With God our Creator
Children all are we,
Let us walk with each other
In perfect harmony.*

To hear all our voices, even those of different faiths, all praising God in one together, creates this profound moment of kinship and kindles my love for them.

May we all use our voices to create peace in this critical time, to break the bonds of fear, and to kindle a holy, Godly love for everyone. Amen.