

## SERMON: “Praise Be to God!”

First United Church, Waterloo – Sunday, May 1, 2022

*PRAYER: “Holy God, glorious and mysterious, who creates, tends, and enlivens the universe, continue to draw reverence from us. Liberating God, who delivers us and the world from evil and waywardness through Jesus, the Christ, crucified and risen, continue to evoke our praise. Enlightening God, who imparts wisdom and power through your Spirit, continue to elicit our thanksgiving. Holy God, we cannot keep from singing.” Amen*

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Medical science in Britain in the Middle Ages was not particularly advanced. Quite often, persons who had lapsed into a coma were pronounced dead, and then buried. Now and then, some of the deceased were disinterred and relocated to another burial site. It was sometimes noticed that the fingers on some interred bodies were worn down to the bone. That indicated that some people had returned to consciousness and tried to claw their way out of their coffins. Consequently, a number of British families began to bury their dead with a string on one wrist. The other end of the string was attached to a small bell that hung above ground. (You probably have heard this story and know where it is going). It became possible for mistakenly-buried persons to return to consciousness to begin moving so that the little bell would ring. Local townsfolk could rush out to the cemetery to rescue them. Over the years quite a number of living bodies were exhumed, thanks to the tinkling of a bell. Of course, many of their friends were, at first, startled to see them up and moving about again. And another everyday English phrase came into common usage. “O my, that looks like Ted Smythe. I thought he was dead.” “Yes, he must be a dead-ringer!” I And later, that became fodder for twentieth-century Monty Python skits: “I’m not dead yet!” “Quiet! You will be shortly.”

### CHRIST IS RISEN

The marvel and wondrously vibrant truth of Jesus, risen from the dead is cause for more than a mere tinkling of a bell. Strike up the band! Let the brass blare, the woodwinds whorl, the strings set off serenades, and all the percussion clatter, clamour, rattle, and thump! Let a never-ending symphony be unleashed.

Such was the nature of the inner music resonant in the hearts of Christ’s closest followers when he appeared among them for a few days, perhaps weeks, in risen form. It rendered them fearless, persistent, and unflaggingly hopeful. It blew away any residual or niggling doubts harboured by the disciple Thomas; drove him to his knees to utter the earliest chorus of confession, “My Lord and my God”. That little phrase found amplification in one of the earliest Christian hymns which Paul quotes from in his letter to the Philippians.

In recent praise music, it has been turned into a repeatable refrain:

*“Christ is Lord. Christ is Lord. Christ is risen from the dead and Christ is Lord.  
Every knee shall bow, every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.”*

In the mystic vision of an end-of-the-first-century exile named John,  
as God’s dream for all creation is imagined as consummated,  
life in eternity is characterized in perpetual worship and celebration:

*“to the One who loves us and frees us ... and made us to be God’s commonwealth,  
all of us ministers in God’s service ... to that One be glory and sovereignty forever.” (Rev. 1:6)*

Whatever else might go on in God’s eternal realm, there’s going to be a party atmosphere  
filled with the unfettered exuberance of expressed gratitude and joy.

Should there also be more serene, peaceful, silent moments

I suspect they will shimmer with something like soothing electric current, like a slow massage.

## ANCIENT ISRAEL CUTS LOOSE

Long before God broke new ground and hope through sending Jesus,  
ancient Israel was already engaged in a frequent practice of praise and acclamation.

We only need to check out their hymn book to get the flavour of that: the book of Psalms.

More than one-third of those songs and poems are hymns of thanksgiving:

*“O sing a new song to the Lord ....”*

*“Bless my God, O my soul ....”*

*“O give thanks to our God, for God is good ....”*

*“Make a joyful noise to God all the earth ....”*

*“O God, our God, how majestic is your name in all the earth ...”*

That’s but a small sample. The last seven Psalms, 144-150, are saturated with praise.

Psalm 150 winds it all up with a vision of a combined choristers plus full orchestra  
located both in heaven and on earth:

*“Praise God in the sanctuary. Praise God in the mighty firmament.*

*Praise God with trumpets and brass. Praise God with lute and harp.*

*Praise God with tambourine and dance and strings and pipes (wind instruments).*

*Praise God with clanging cymbals, with loud clanging cymbals!*

*Let everything that breathes praise our God!”*

Now, that’s worship and celebration without constraints, like Pentecostals on a spiritual tear!

German Bible scholar Artur Weiser commented on this psalm some time ago:

*“In praising God the meaning of the world is fulfilled.*

*To praise the abundance of God’s saving (transforming) power is the purpose  
which links together the most diverse voices in heaven and on earth....” 2*

If there are any among us who remember the first question and answer section  
of the Shorter Catechism, once used as preparation for confirmation, bells should be ringing:

*“What is the chief purpose of humankind?*

*The chief purpose of humankind is to glorify God and to enjoy God forever.”*

## SINGING OUR JOY

Age after age, the people of God have expressed thanksgiving and joy in song and praise. The earliest forms of Christian praise were chant and plainsong, almost always in Latin: *“Laudate Dominum”, “Jubilare Deo”*. *“Kyrie Eleison”* is a Greek phrase.

After the Protestant Reformation, praise with musical accompaniment, hymnody arose. Voices United, our most recent United Church hymn book has 72 hymns directly on the theme of joy.

They reflect varying modes as well as stages of expressions of faith.

There are classic tunes, several centuries old, such as “Jesu, Joy of Our Desiring”; several by Methodist hymn-writer, Charles Wesley, like “O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing”; and personalized praises that sprang up during the Great Awakening revival movement in the late 1800s, such as “I’ve Got Joy Like a Fountain”.

A mini-flood of folk music praise washed the shores of church singing in the 1960s. and continued into the 1970s. It was most popular in Catholic circles led by the likes of the Medical Mission Sisters, Joe Wise, and Carey Landry.

Sometimes they showed up in Protestant worship. For instance, one by Miriam Thérèse-Winter: *“I saw raindrops on my window, joy is like the rain”*.

Tunes and songs from other cultures began to be introduced into United Church worship in the 1980s, thanks to many of our partners in mission fields beyond Canada.

Consider: *“Let us talents and tongues employ, reaching out with a shout of joy.”*

Contemporary composers of praise such as Linnea Good have offered us songs like:

*“Make a joyful noise all the earth. Worship your God with gladness.”* Singing Psalm 100.

2007 saw the introduction of 200+ more options for praise with the publication of More Voices.

Congregations began to learn a number of simple choruses and draw from a smorgasbord of international praises.

I suspect if you polled United Church congregations today to name their top ten favorite hymns there is one that repeatedly winds up at the top of the list: *“Joyful, Joyful, We Adore You.”*

God’s people, followers of Christ, continue to find God so worthy of thanksgiving and praise that we cannot keep from singing.

## PRAISE COMES WITH A COST

Praising God we offer thanks for God’s goodness, God’s blessings, and God’s liberating power. Sometimes, “Praise the Lord!” is a dangerous shout.

During the first hundred years of the Christian church’s existence within the Roman Empire, “Lord” was a term reserved solely for the Emperor.

American theologian Brian McLaren made note of that in The Secret Message of Jesus (2006):

*“To say Jesus is Lord is to declare one’s allegiance to a different empire or kingdom ... (for thousands of early believers such a confession brought persecution, or even death) not for their religious beliefs, but for their lack of patriotism and national loyalty in refusing to say the expected ‘pledge of allegiance’ to Caesar.”* 3

“Praise the Lord”, (or my more inclusive preference, “Praise the Sovereign One”), or “Glory to God”, or any reference to God’s divine rule aren’t only an isolated individual professions, they are also political placards, choral notes of commitment to an alternative form of social community.

Easter hope and promise give people of faith courage for the long haul,  
*give them stamina, strength, and patience as liberation and justice slowly works themselves out.*  
Consider this dream, this song of the heart from a Sudanese refugee, Clement Janda.  
In the 1990s, when he composed it, he had fled from Darfur and found shelter in Zambia.  
I don’t know that he has yet been able to return home.

*“My name is Dusman. Translated: feud, war, conflict. These are my names ...  
I have never known Salam. Translated: peace, tranquility.  
But I know many sisters and brothers called Glaba, Bazuka, Comrade, Maja’ah.  
Translated: forest, bazooka gun, comrade-in-arms, famine.  
Over forty years I have experienced refugee displacement, uprootedness, scorn.  
I am the epitome of poverty, hunger, nakedness marks me out.  
Illiteracy is my crown since they destroyed all the mission places of learning ...  
For a job I must become a slave! So humanity is watching me wear out!  
My God-given land is a battle-field. The greenness is wasted like the rain that waters it.  
Instead of planting maize, beans, potatoes, and rice;  
land mines, bombs, bullets, and, of course, corpses and bones litter it.  
Instead of building roads, houses, churches, there was the destruction of houses  
and bridges seemingly to eliminate rebellion.  
Our village homes have become wildlife preserves and their caves and dens ... my hiding-place.  
In all this I have not lost Hope because I believe in the God of Hope.  
The God known to stand for the cause of the oppressed, the deprived, the persecuted ...  
Some day I shall be baptized. I may even receive a new name, a new identity:  
Salam Dusman. Translated: Peaceful Conflict or just Shalom!” 4*

Similar songs of praise and yearning are composed in the heart of millions of other refugees from elsewhere in Africa, from Iran and Syria, and now, most recently, from the Ukraine.

They are songs of faith underscored by Easter.

And whenever those days come, those days baptized with new identity, and true freedom, and communities of shalom in the world, we will continue to praise the God who helps it happen.

## CONCLUSION

*“Praise God in God’s sanctuary. Praise God in the mighty firmament!  
Praise God for God’s mighty deeds; praise God according to God’s surpassing greatness.”  
(Psalm 150:1b-2)*

This, this is how lives find purpose. This is how the world evolves towards fulfillment.  
Here’s how our United Church Song of Faith calls for it:

*“We sing of God’s good news lived out, a church with a purpose:  
faith nurtured and hearts comforted, gifts shared for the good of all,*

*resistance to the forces that exploit and marginalize,  
fierce love in the face of violence, human dignity defended,  
members of a community held and inspired by God, corrected and comforted,  
instruments of the loving Spirit of Christ, creation's mending.  
We sing of God's mission. And we cannot keep from singing."*

The risen Jesus is no dead ringer. He's the leader of a whole new band --  
a cumulative chorus, a ceaseless symphony, a loud and clanging cymbal  
that symbolizes the dawning and unfolding of a coming Empire or everlasting wholeness.  
Praise be to God! Praise be to God!

*"To the One who loves us and freed us ... and made us to be God's commonwealth,  
all of us ministers in God's service ... to that One be glory and sovereignty for ever."*  
(Revelation 1:6)

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### *Notes*

*1 See Albert Jack, Red Herrings and White Elephants: The Origins of Phrases We Use Everyday, (Harper Collins, New York, NY: 2004), page 201.*

*2 Artur Weiser, The Psalms, (Old Testament Library), (Westminster Press, Philadelphia, PA: 1962, translated by Herbert Hartwell), page 841.*

*3 Brian D. McLaren, The Secret Message of Jesus: Uncovering the Truth that Could Change Everything, (W Publishing, Nashville, TN: 2006), page 97.*

*4 From Geoffrey Duncan, editor, Wisdom Is Calling, (United Church Publishing House, Toronto, ON: 1999), pages 198-199.*