

<Exodus 15:1-3, 11-13, 17-18, 20-21; Psalm 98:1-9; Luke 1:46-55>

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Immanuel, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.

“*Ashira l’adonai, ki gaoh ga-ah.* [I will sing to the Lord for He has triumphed gloriously]
Ashira, l’adonai, ki gaoh ga-ah. [I will sing to the Lord for He has triumphed gloriously]
Mi chamocha baelim adonai, [Who is like you, O Lord, among the celestials]
Mi chamocha nedar bakodesh. [Who is like you, majestic in holiness]
Nachita v’chas-d’cha am zu ga-alta [In your love, you lead the people you redeemed]
Nachita v’chas-d’cha am zu ga-alta! [In your love, you lead the people you redeemed]
Ashira! Ashira! Ashira!” [I will sing! I will sing! I will sing!]

It is said that a joyful child will be one who sings. Not necessarily in the choir, or with guidance and direction, but will generally just sing at various points throughout the day. The theory is that their joy, their contentment and peace of heart are so well-established that they can’t help but let some of that joy seep out of their hearts in the form of song, made-up or otherwise. I might caution that a child who does not spontaneously sing is not necessarily one who is not filled with joy; I don’t believe the converse is as applicable. But limited observation of my own child is one which supports this theory, that children who spontaneously sing are children filled with joy.

When was the last time you spontaneously broke out into song? When was the last time you got caught up in a song on the radio or your playlist and the joy you felt in the depths of your spirit spilled out into the world around you?

On this Gaudete Sunday of Advent, the odd one where we light the pink candle instead of the purple, the one that stands out, we are reminded that we are a people of joy. Tied to the Latin word for “rejoice,” Gaudete becomes a direct and visceral reminder of the joy that comes into our world in the person of Immanuel, the Messiah, the Christ. It is a reminder that the children of God, having witnessed the mighty, merciful, and miraculous acts of God and called by name in the Spirit of God, are indeed a joyful people. And how can we keep from singing?

The children of God, as they make their way out of Egypt, begin to sing. I like to think of this occasion as it is depicted by the 1998 film *The Prince of Egypt*, where it is a song literally begun by the children. In the Exodus story, however, it is Miriam, sister of Moses, who begins the song, which the people then take up with her. *Ashira l’adonai, ki gaoh ga-ah.* “I will sing to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously!”

The people, the children of God, are departing one reality - that of slaves in bondage in a foreign country, far from home, far from their identity and spirituality - and they are entering into a new reality - those who are redeemed and guided by God, returned to their identity and the hope of embodied good news. *Ashira* - I will sing - indeed.

This is not to say that joy is always easy to see or remember, and I would not dare to tell you otherwise. We know the truth of that, and our stories of faith in Scripture do not pretend otherwise, either. Yet, in the most difficult of situations and experiences, again and again the reminder is present. The children of God leaving Egypt and wandering the wilderness knew this, and were likewise reminded when they could not remember.

Mary and Elizabeth also knew this, and their situations were anything but straightforward or easy. Mary, an unwed teenager, pregnant out of wedlock, and her finance knowing he was not responsible for this. And Elizabeth, past childbearing age to begin with, now suddenly pregnant with a husband whose mouth has been shut by the angel of the Lord. These are difficult realities and situations. There certainly are occasions when it is difficult to keep our eyes on the song of joy that is around us.

Chet Atkins was, I understand, one of the great country music guitarists. He was energetic, creative, imaginative, and the music seemed to flow from his fingertips. The story is told of a recording session once with several younger, less-experienced musicians attempting to play with him, and struggling to keep up. Eventually, one of them, in exasperation, put down his instrument and exclaimed with frustration, “I don’t know what to do here!”

How frequently is this our cry, as well? How often do we, in our lives, in this world, look at everything around us and exclaim, or whisper, “I don’t know what to do here!”? And when we do, how far our hearts feel from being able to sing. Even in this season, on this joy-filled Gaudete Sunday of music, how often is this our broken refrain?

It is said that, in response to this younger musician, and his frustration, Chet Atkins simply responded with, “I find that the melody usually works.”

Our call, our refrain, is to likewise stick with the melody of God’s promises, God’s providence, God’s presence. These are the melodies of our lives of faith, and the source of our joy-fueled song.

According to our story from Luke’s gospel this morning, the unexpected and miraculous baby in Elizabeth’s womb recognized the miraculous and globally hoped-for baby in Mary’s womb, and leapt for joy. And Mary, herself, sang. “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior; for he has looked with favor on the lowly state of his servant.”

This is our melody, still, today. Not just when the world seems fraught and our spirits are confused, exacerbated, and heavy-laden, but *especially* when the world seems fraught and our spirits are confused, exacerbated, and heavy-laden. “My soul magnifies the Lord...”. *Ashira l’adonai*. The language of the children of God is the melody of joy, proclaimed in song. Let our hearts, our spirits, and our mouths proclaim joy, once more and always. Amen.

(Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church)