A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

***“A Time for Singing”***

1 Chronicles 16

April 15, 2018

There is a time to weep and a time to laugh. A time to mourn, and a time to dance.

For Christians, the time to laugh and dance and sing is named Easter. For this is the time of resurrection hope. That time is now and forevermore, for those who have received the gift of life from he who died for all creation. “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.”

To be witnesses of these things is to be a people who have heard the good news and received it in faith. It is to live as a people set free, a people who know they are loved, and to live as a people who love generously and radically. It is to be a people who sing.

It takes a little courage to sing. Most of us are not really all that good at it. That means that most of us know the intrinsic value of being with other people, not necessarily even other people who are especially good at singing, just other people. When we’re with other people who are singing, we start to sound pretty good. A whole room of people who each individually are not that good at singing, when they’re all together, sound like a people who are pretty good at singing. Isn’t that a miracle, like water into wine? It happens every Sunday around here.

I know a theologian who was invited to speak at a Saturday evening gathering of the local atheist and agnostic club. He went and gave his speech. Afterwards, he was asked, “Well, what was it like, being at the atheist and agnostic club?” He said that in a lot of ways it was a lot like going to church. The people were nice and hospitable. They listened attentively, asked good questions, and expressed concern for pressing matters of justice and peace and care for society’s problems and those who suffer from them the most. It was an entirely pleasant evening. It was a lot like going to church. With one difference. “What’s that?” he was asked. “The atheists don’t have songs to sing. There was no music.”

It seems like every time Christians are together, someone starts singing. The church’s music is a witness of hope in the face of everything in this life that can stifle hope. Ultimately, music joins heads and hearts in praise. This is true, even at funerals, even especially when we confront the reality of death with the hope of resurrection. In the presence of death is where Christian hope is most real if it is within us at all.

Old-time Wacoan Martha Emmons was a brilliant folklorist and storyteller. In one of her books in 1975 (*I Come Runnin’*) she writes, “Not long ago I attended a funeral of a prominent black citizen. On the platform were eight ministers, some of them were well-known divines from distant places. Among the messages of comfort and reassurance, I noted especially some words, beautifully and mellifluously spoken. They came at the close of one minister’s talk. He spoke of Christian hope inspired by the resurrection of Jesus. He said in part:

He robbed Death of his sting;

He robbed the Grave of his victory;

And he lef’ em both speechless at the tomb. (p 82)

There’s a time for being speechless. And there’s a time for music and singing. Now is the time for singing.

Something like 250 times in the Bible we are told to give God praise and thanksgiving. It is the most repeated command in all of scripture. The theological and symbolic center of praise and thanksgiving is in the Eucharist, the Great Thanksgiving. By broken bread and crushed grapes we remember the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Son of God, and we experience his resurrection presence with us as we share the sacred meal. It is a meal of remembrance, thanksgiving, and praise to God. Those three: remembrance, thanksgiving, and praise are wound together as a three-cord strand. We remember what God has done. We give thanks. And we praise. And then we begin again and have the grace of remembering again what God has done. And over and over again, we return back around again and again in the love of God. Remembrance, thanksgiving, and praise.

David’s song in 1 Chronicles 16 is woven through with these as well. It may just be the very theological center of the Old Testament. And it’s a great story. The Ark of the Covenant has been sitting in mothballs in Kiriath-Jearim since they got it back from the Philistines, but Jerusalem has become the spiritual and political capital of Israel under King David and it was time to take it up to the holy city. Built by exact instructions in Exodus, the ark held the tablets of the Ten Commandments. The Ark was holy. It was a wonder. It had mysterious power as the Philistines found out when they captured it for a brief time.

The Ark itself was as close as they had to actually having God with them. Inside it were the tablets that Moses brought down Mt. Sinai. The day they brought the ark into Jerusalem was a joyful parade. Levites carried poles that carried the Ark. Singers, musicians, all the pomp and circumstance they could round up. Everyone loves a parade! Well, not everyone. David’s own wife did not care for it.

She didn’t even come out to see it, but peeked out her window, looking down on the procession just in time to see David, David himself, the king of Israel, dancing down the street leading the parade. She saw David’s dance, heard the music, and despised him in her heart.

She missed out. Sometimes it is time for silence, but this was the day for singing and dancing. David led the way, himself dancing in front of the procession of the holy Ark to Jerusalem. He was leading the parade. Nothing could stop the music. The dance went on.

We might see in this story the gravitational center of the whole span of the Old Testament story. Think of all the themes that are present here:

The Ten Commandments and the Ark

The importance of the Promised Land and Israel inhabiting the land

The establishment of Jerusalem as the holy city

The kingship of David, and in his wife’s sullenness, memory of the first king Saul. She was Saul’s daughter.

The role of the Levites carrying the ark. They would be the priests of the temple.

The temple itself, not to be built for another generation, represented by the tabernacle where they are taking the ark.

So, right here in this story we see: the tribes, the exodus, the law, the kingship, the land, the city, the temple.

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about all of this was that it was not a staged nostalgic reenactment of the past. David didn’t dress up like Moses and pretend to be coming down the mountain with the ark. They didn’t travel to Mt. Sinai to try to recapture the place where they’d met God all those years ago. This wasn’t a recreation of what was; this was a renewal of what is. God is not just the God of the past for people who wish they could go back in time to the glory years. God is the God of the present and the future; of love and hope, of the life that is and the life to come.

Musicians help us remember this. Every time music is played, every time, even if it is exactly by the notes written on the page rehearsed over and over again to perfection, something new is born in the room that will never be the same again. There is always new creation, every time the cymbals crash, the trumpet plays, the flute and the lyre sound their notes. Every time the master sits at the piano bench before the congregation and every time a child or teenager sneaks up to the same keys when she thinks no one is listening, to let her fingers try to follow what her ears have heard.

The musicians were lined up. Each held an instrument: cymbals, flutes, trumpets, lyres, harps. Call up the troubadours; reunite the desperados. The music is beginning and it’s time to strike up a chord. The music was playing. All we needed were the lyrics. Then we got them: words for all time. A song of remembrance, thanksgiving, praise to God in whom you have been richly blessed and by which we are still blessed for ever and ever. In the season for singing the beat goes on, and this is the music:

*Give thanks to the Lord; call upon his name.*

*Make known his deeds among the peoples!*

*Sing to him, sing praises to him,*

*Tell of all his wondrous works.*

*Glory in his holy name.*

*Let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice.*

*Save us, O God, of our salvation.*

*And gather and deliver us*

*That we may give thanks to your holy name*

*And glory in your praise.*

*Blessed by the Lord, the God of Israel,*

*From everlasting to everlasting.*

And all the people said, “Amen” and they praised the Lord.

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