

SING TO THE LORD

Psalm 96 • Pastor Luke Herche

Good morning again.

Turn with me if you would to Psalm 96. As has already been mentioned, that will be our sermon text for this morning. Psalm 96. We've just sung it, but we are going to read it again. (Sung, most of it anyway.) But before we read it, let's pray together.

Oh, our Father, we come to you to hear your voice speaking to us in the scriptures. We pray that you would work in us by your spirit, that we would come with open minds and open hearts ready to receive what you have to say to us. We pray that you would teach us through your word, that you would give us humble hearts that are teachable, and we pray that you would continue as you do week after week to shape us by your Word and to mold us into the image of your son Jesus, that we would reflect your glory in the world. Be with us by your Holy Spirit now to that end. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

This is Psalm 96:

Oh sing to the LORD a new song;
sing to the LORD, all the earth!
Sing to the LORD, bless his name;
tell of his salvation from day to day.
Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvelous works among all the peoples!
For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised;
he is to be feared above all gods.
For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols,
but the LORD made the heavens.
Splendor and majesty are before him;
strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.
Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength!
Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;
bring an offering, and come into his courts!
Worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness;
tremble before him, all the earth!

Say among the nations, "The LORD reigns!
Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved;
he will judge the peoples with equity."
Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;
let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
let the field exult, and everything in it!
Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy
before the LORD, for he comes,
for he comes to judge the earth.
He will judge the world in righteousness,
and the peoples in his faithfulness.

Do you like to sing? There are people who don't like to sing. Maybe you're one of them. I wonder why that is? Why do some people just not want to sing? Some people think they can't sing. I think that's mostly not true, but I guess it does take practice. Some people are shy. They're afraid of what others might think. I mean, I do most of my best singing when you guys aren't around. Some people have nothing to sing about. They're sad, sorrowful, depressed. Some people think singing is just frivolous. Their life is serious and singing just doesn't fit in.

I've actually always loved to sing. As far back as I can remember, I would put on my mom's old Beach Boy records and sing along. I had dozens of cassette tapes as a kid and, later, dozens of CDs. And I think music for me always felt transcendent. Kind of lifted me out of the present moment and brought me to a place of deep emotion. Whether that was joy or sorrow because, of course, not all music is happy after all. Some is quite depressing.

But whether music is happy or sad, it enables you to feel deeply, to express the deepest emotions of your soul, and to know that you're not alone in that. At the very least the singer of the song that you're singing along with is expressing that same emotion.

Scripture has a lot to say about singing. We're not going to cover everything Scripture says, but we're gonna look at one chapter—one psalm—again, and what it teaches us about singing. And we're going to get into this psalm by way of four questions: Who is to sing? Why are we to sing? How are we to sing? And what are we to sing? If you want to follow along that outline is on the back of your bulletin.

So first, **who is to sing?**

What people does God call to sing to him? What creatures does God call to sing to him? The short answer to both of those questions is "all of them." Verse 1 starts out "Oh sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth!"

The rest of the Psalm fleshes out just what is meant by all the earth. Interestingly enough, Israel is actually nowhere mentioned in this Psalm. Obviously, it's a song in Israel's hymn book, as it were. But Israel, as they sing this psalm, they are exhorting—not Israel to sing—but they're exhorting the nations. Exhorting the peoples. And here's why this is so important. God's people are calling the nations and the peoples (verse 3), they're calling the families of the earth (verse 7), to sing to the LORD, the God of Israel. Israel is not under the delusion that their God is just some local deity. They know that the LORD, Yahweh, is the God of heaven and earth. He is the God of all peoples. There is not one God for the Israelites and another for the Babylonians and a third for the Egyptians. There's not one God for Americans and another for Russians and a third for Indonesians. There is only one God for all nations. And so all nations should sing to this one God. And this psalm, then, is in a sense evangelistic in that it's calling the nations to worship Yahweh, calling the nations to rejoice in him. That is, it's calling them to leave their false gods and their false loves, and to delight in the one who is supremely lovely, the God of Israel, Yahweh.

And yet the call of Psalm 96 even goes beyond the nations. I mean look at verses 11 and 12. Verse 11, starts "Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; let the field exult, and everything in it! Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy." The heavens, the earth, the sea, the field, the trees, and everything in them—the fish, the birds, the cattle—is to sing for joy!

Now what does that mean? How did the *trees* sing for joy?

Well, I was once singing the song, there may be one or two people in here who know it. The song "I see the moon and the moon sees me up through the bows of the old oak tree." Apparently it was a big hit in 1953. But I was told—while singing that song—by a Christian person that it was a pagan song and I shouldn't sing it because the moon can't see me. Well, that statement was absurd. Because the song is just using anthropomorphism. It's humanizing the moon to make a point.

But the question is, is that what's going on here in Psalm 96? Are verses 11 and 12, simply humanizing creation? Some commentators actually don't even

mention the oddity of verses 11 and 12. And I think they don't mention it because they don't notice it, and they don't notice it because, in one sense, nowadays we just write off verses 11 and 12 as merely figurative. The heavens can't actually be glad the earth can't rejoice, the field can't exult, and trees don't sing for joy. And so this is *mere* anthropomorphism. And because of that, we pass right over it.

That doesn't sit right with me. I mean, Psalm 19 says "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge...Their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world." The creation itself communicates to us. No, not because it has a mind, or thoughts, or a reason. But because it is God's world and it says something about him.

And yet the creation we know from the rest of Scripture is not what it was meant to be. Romans 8:19–22 says, "For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption, and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now."

Paul speaks there of the whole, non-rational creation. And he's not talking about angels there, or demons, who either are not cursed (angels), or will be one day without the hope of freedom (demons). So that's not who he's talking about. He's not talking about people who have been subjected to the curse, but because of our own will, because of the will of Adam.

But Paul is talking about everything else—that part of the created order that was unwillingly subjected to the curse, but will one day be freed from it. This is the sky and the sea, the grass and the trees, the birds and the beasts, and so on. These things presently groan under the weight of human sin, the corruption that we have brought upon the earth. And they have this eager longing for freedom.

Now, yes, there is some anthropomorphism in there. But there is a literal foundation to it, that the world is broken, it really is broken. God did not originally create tsunamis and tornadoes and hurricanes and earthquakes to kill thousands of people. Those things are a result of the fall and the brokenness of this world. God didn't create diseases and sicknesses to plague us and steal our life and joy. If Thomas is right, God didn't originally create mosquitoes either.

Creation has been corrupted, and so it groans. Creation is broken and we broke it. So what do verses 11 and 12 mean when they say "Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; let the field exult, and everything in it! Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy"? Why? Why should the trees sing for joy? Well, because as the next sentence tells us, because God is coming to put things right. But that brings us to our next point.

Why are we to sing?

One voice teacher in Britain says that that "singing is the language of the soul and the soul is where you can transcend the drudgery of the day."¹ Apparently, research shows that people who sing regularly are happier and healthier and live longer. Now, I don't know how this research was done so I can't attest that singing is somehow the cause of those things. But it's an interesting correlation, at the very least.

But the reasons that we are to sing are not because it allows us to transcend the drudgery of the day, nor because it makes us happier, healthier, or live longer. Though I guess those are all perks if they're true. The reason we are to sing is because God is worthy of our song. Verse 8 says give to the LORD the honor due his name. Why is God worthy of our song? Well, this Psalm tells us, really throughout, and it builds its reason stanza by stanza as it moves along. Verses 4–6 tell us that the LORD is the one who made the world, that all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols. You may know Psalm 115 describes just how worthless the idols of the nations are. In Psalm 115 it says "Their idols are silver and gold, the work of human hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; and they do not make a sound in their throat." Whatever god you may worship, if it is not the LORD, it is no god.

This is true of the idols of old, it's true of the idols of our day as well. The one example given here is this: in contrast to the idols, the LORD made the heavens. Now we, by all of our science and research, can't even fully understand the heavens. We can understand a lot, don't get me wrong. But as with most true wisdom, the more we understand, the more we realize we don't understand. The more you learn, the more questions you have. But God not only understands how each star was formed, he himself called them out by name. No matter how close we get to understanding the creation, we don't get any closer to creating. Because all we can do is refashion what God has

¹ Nikki Slade quoted at <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-16010414>.

already called into existence. He made the heavens! And so "great is the LORD and greatly to be praised" (verse 4). He is splendid and majestic, strong and beautiful and all of his works show forth his glory.

But God not only made the world, he also rules over it. Verse 10. Verse 10, says, "Say among the nations, 'The LORD reigns! Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved; he will judge the peoples with equity.'"

Now it's interesting. Verse 10, has been used by some to show that the Bible contradicts basic astronomy. You may know this, people have taken the phrase "the world is established; it shall never be moved" to mean the globe does not rotate around the sun. But the world here refers, actually, to the inhabited world, especially with respect to the inhabitants. So verse 13 uses the same word. In verse 13 the word "world" is parallel to "peoples." Notice the lines before and after, here in verse 10: "The LORD reigns"—that is, like a king over a people—and "he will judge the peoples." See, the world being established is to say, God has established the world of man, the world of mankind, and it's not going away. It's not going away because God reigns over it and judges with equity. The point here is God presides over the nations. He is the one who rules all this and so he is worthy of our song. Again.

And yet there's still more. He made the world (verses 4–6); he maintains order within it (verse 10); and he is coming to judge (verse 13). Again, backing up into Verse 12, "Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the LORD, for He comes, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness, and the peoples in his faithfulness." See, this is why the heavens can once again be glad. This is why the earth can rejoice, the sea roar, the field exult, because the LORD is coming. He is coming to judge in righteousness and in faithfulness which means he is coming to put things right. He's coming to fix what has been broken. The world is broken, and we have broken it! The created order is broken. The social order is broken. But God is coming to judge and to put things back the way they were meant to be. And the God who will come and put things right, and make all things new, that is a reason to rejoice. That is a cause to sing.

And so, **who is to sing?** Well, all creation right? The world of men and beasts and sky and land and sea. **Why are we to sing?** Because God made the world. God rules over the world. And God is coming to put things right.

Well, **how are we to sing?** How are we to sing? The short answer is we're to sing with our whole selves. What does that mean?

Well, first, we're to sing with our emotions. Verse 4 says God is to be feared. As Christian people, as people who understand grace, we tend to depreciate this. We say, "Well, it's not really about fear. It's simply about *reverence*." And I get that. If you belong to Christ, you do not need to fear judgment. "Perfect love," John says, "casts out fear." "Fear has to do with punishment," but Jesus has borne our punishment on the cross. And so if you belong to Christ, you don't need to fear judgment. That's true. But that doesn't mean you don't fear God. Reverence is a good word, but I don't feel like it goes far enough. Verse 9 says to "tremble before him, all the earth!" We tremble with an awareness of who God is. Not because we're afraid of punishment, but because we are overwhelmed with His Majesty.

If I can make this comparison, I tend to think about this as the awe that two pure people experience as they come together for the first time on their wedding night. There's an awe and a wonder and a trembling. That is the fear of the Lord: being overwhelmed with the thought of him and his glory, when that so fills your mind that at times it causes you to tremble with awe and even anticipation at knowing him more.

Well, we sing not only with fear and trembling, but also with gladness and joy. Verse 11. Verse 11, says "Let the heavens be glad, and the earth rejoice...the trees of the forest sing for joy." As we saw last week, joy in what our God has done should overflow into spontaneous praise. Singing is the highest expression of our emotions, as we not only employ sound and words, but tone and variation and timing and rhythm and pitch, and we put all of that together to express the joy of our hearts.

So how do we sing? We sing with our whole selves, which means first we sing with our emotions. But it also means that we sing with our bodies.

Now, that seems almost silly to say, doesn't it? But we can't sing without our bodies. We lift up our voice, we have words on our tongue. We sing out with our breath employing lungs and muscles to push out a tune. And of course, the Psalms encourage us to lift up our hands and to clap our hands and to play an instrument with our hands. Psalm 33:3 says even to play skillfully, which requires understanding and talent and practice—practice and muscle memory and all the rest.

We bow down. There's something I think we do wrong in worship—rather, something we don't do—and that is that we never bow down. We never kneel. Now, there are lots of reasons for that. The first is it's awkward. We've never done it before and we wouldn't know how to do it. We don't have kneelers in our church, after all.

Second is, as Protestants, we think it's too Catholic to think of kneeling in worship. But I wonder if you set Catholicism aside for a minute and just read your Bible, would you ever bow before God? Hold on to that.

Third, we say "What do you do with your body?" Or we say "What you do with your body doesn't matter as long as your heart is in the right place." Really? Is that right? I don't think so. I think our bodies matter; what we do with our bodies matters. You know, if I get in your face, or if I fall on my face, that says something to you and it does something to me.

And by the way, the language of worship in Scripture is bodily language. Just take the word "worship" for a minute. 8% of the words that are translated as "worship" in ESV mean "to serve," or "to work as a servant," which is something you do with your body. So to worship the Lord is to serve him. But 84% of the words translated "worship" in the ESV basically mean "to bow down." And that doesn't even include verses like Psalm 95 verse 6 which says, "Oh come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the LORD, our maker!" Now I'm not saying that you should kneel while you sing because that might be a bit tricky. But I am saying God calls us to employ our whole selves, our whole bodies, as we worship him and even our posture matters. It says something both to God and it does something to us.

Third, and this follows, I think, from those other two points, how do we sing if we're bringing our emotions and our bodies? We sing to God in accordance with our nature. Right? The angels can't sing the way we sing, because they're not human beings. When the psalmist talks in verses 11–12 about the heavens being glad and the earth rejoicing, he says "the seas roar." He must have had fun with that one, right? You can hear the crashing of the waves of the sea. The seas roar and give glory to God in that way. And of course, the heavens and the earth and the sea and the field and the trees, they're going to sing for joy in one way: by being what God made them to be. But we are going to sing in a different way. Because we're going to sing with our voices, with our tongues, with our mouths.

Of course, even people and nations are going to differ in how they sing. All peoples are to sing: people from every tribe and nation and tongue. Every tongue—that is, every language—will be represented in the new heavens and the new earth we're told in the book of Revelation. And so people sing in their different tongues, in different languages. And yet language is just one aspect of culture. And I think there will be music from every culture in the new creation, right? Hip hop music and Baroque; country and Gregorian chants. Now, there may even be a fusion cuisine of music like Gregorian hip hop

perhaps. (I don't know what that would look like, but...) Which means that here and now we should feel free to sing consistently with our present cultural context. Part of our role is to sanctify, to consecrate this present world to the glory of God. We take up the stuff of this present age and we use it for the purposes and the ends of the age to come, in gratitude to our Father, and for His glory.

And so how do we sing? We sing with our whole selves, which means we sing with our emotions. We sing with our bodies. We sing according to our nature. And finally we sing *not* empty handed.

If one commentator is right, "ascribe" here means simply "give," as it does when Rachel said to Jacob in Genesis 30, "Give me children or I die." It's the same word. If that is the case, verses 7 and 8 are saying give to the Lord *your* honor and strength, and the honor due his name, that is, by honoring his name with your life. Giving him your glory and strength is giving to God your best, what you have, what you are. This is explained, then, in the second half of verse 8, "bring an offering, and come into his courts!" That's what it means to bring to God honor and glory. That is, bring your best to him. We don't sing to God with our voice but then serve ourselves with our hands. Our singing must not be disconnected from a life lived for him, giving our all to our Father in heaven.

And so, how do we sing? We sing with our whole selves, which means we sing with our emotions. We sing with our bodies. We sing according to our nature. We sing even as we serve God with our whole lives, bring our whole selves to him.

And so, who is to sing? All creation. Why are we to sing? Because God made the world, rules the world, and is coming to put things right. How are we to sing? We're to sing with our whole selves, every aspect of who we are. And finally, **what are we to sing?**

Our Psalm really gives two answers to this question. The first is a song about God and His works. We just talked about this really under "Why are we to sing?" Our reason for singing is the content of our songs. And so we sing about God's name and salvation (verse 2); we sing about God's glory and marvelous works (verse 3); we sing about God's greatness (verse 4); God's making the heavens (verse 5); God's splendor and majesty and strength and beauty (verse 6); his glory and strength (verses 7 and 8); the splendor of his holiness (verse 9); his reign, his rule over all things, and his justice and equity (verse 10); his coming to judge in righteousness and faithfulness (verse 13). See God's greatness and glory, his person and work are the content of our song.

We're not here to sing about ourselves. We sing about him! Now we may sing about us *in relation to him*—we see that at times in the Psalms. We may mourn over what is: the struggles of life in a fallen world. But the point is always to rejoice in the end and what God has done, is doing, and will do for us.

There's a second answer to this question, though, "what are we to sing?" It's found in the first verse. "Oh sing to the LORD a new song." Now this is a phrase that is repeated in the Psalms, in Isaiah, and even in the book of Revelation. Psalm 33, verse 3, "Sing to him a new song; play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts." Psalm 40, verse 3, "He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear and put their trust in the LORD." Psalm 98, verse 1, "Oh sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things! His right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him."

What does "a new song" mean? Well, first, it means—it at least means—that we need to change our tune, to sing a new song, to sing a song that may be new to us, especially if we have newly come to know God's mercy. To call the nations to sing a new song, in Psalm 96, is to call them to sing a song that would have been new to them, because they had previously sung songs to idols, and now they're called to sing to the Lord.

Maybe you've only ever sung to yourself or for yourself or because you like the way a song made you feel or because you could show off your talent or move a crowd or you've sung in the shower and you've sung along with the radio. And of course, none of that is bad, in and of itself. But as you come to understand the gospel, let me encourage you to sing a new song, to sing to the Lord, to direct your joy to him.

Second, though, a new song not only means new to you, if you have come to understand the gospel, but a new song in light of God's newest, most recent act. And Psalm 40, after describing God's saving work on the psalmist's behalf, then says "He put a new song in my mouth." New because the psalmist has something new to sing about: this new work of God. The same is true in Psalm 98, "Oh Sing to the LORD a new song, for he has done marvelous things!" The new song is in light of what God has just done for his people.

So we should emphasize, of course, that this means, first and foremost, God's newest *redemptive* work for his people. And so we find songs at all the major points of Israel's history, really even beginning in Genesis chapter 2. With the creation of woman, man immediately composes a song to celebrate God's work. But then immediately after the crossing of the Red Sea, in Exodus 14, Moses and Miriam and Israel began to sing a song in Exodus 15, to celebrate

what God had done. After Israel wins a victory over the Canaanites in Judges 4, Deborah and Barak sing a song in Judges 5. Many of the songs are written to celebrate specific occasions of God's work, some national or some personal work of God on behalf of his people. In the beginning of the Gospel of Luke, we find Mary's song and Zechariah's song, both modeled after the Psalms, but celebrating God's newest work in his coming in Christ.

Even the angels join in Luke 2:14, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" Even the angels sing a new song at the birth of Jesus.

Of course, most New Testament scholars will tell you that there are points where Paul seems to be quoting Christian hymns, Ephesians 5 and Colossians 1 and 1 Timothy 3, and so there are already hymns circulating, known in the apostolic church, that Paul can quote to his readers.

Finally, in Revelation, we see new songs being sung in heaven, Revelation 4 and 5 and 14 and 15. So God's people in Scripture, in this Psalm, are commanded to sing a new song. That means a song in light of God's most recent work for his people. Of course, first and foremost, that means his most recent redemptive work, whether the exodus, or the return from exile, or the resurrection of Jesus. And see Jesus has come, which means we need a new song. We're commanded to sing a new song in light of God's most recent redemptive work. That means we sing of Jesus. We sing of his death. We sing of his resurrection. We sing of his reign in heaven. We sing of his return. We sing because Jesus has come to put all things right. He has reconciled us to his Father. He has inaugurated a new creation in his resurrection where all things have begun to be made new. He will return to make the world whole again and to complete the work that he has begun. So we sing because of what God has done for us in Jesus. And we sing *about* what God has done for us in Jesus.

But of course as Scripture says, God's "mercies are new every morning," which means you have a reason to get out of bed and sing every day because of God's fresh mercy to you in Christ.

Will you sing? Will you sing with your whole self? Will you sing because of God's mercy in Christ? Will you sing *about* God's mercy in Christ? If not, Jesus says the stones will cry out. Psalm 98 says the rivers will clap their hands and the hills will sing for joy. Jesus will be praised. Someone will sing to him. Someone will give their whole selves to rejoice in his work. Let it be us.

Let's pray.

Our Father, you are worthy of our praise. You are worthy of our song. You are worthy, you are most worthy, because of what you have done for us in your Son Jesus in giving him as a sacrifice for our sins and raising him from the dead on the third day that we might know newness of life in him, that the whole world might be restored and be made new. Father, we pray that you would help us to sing to you, to sing with our whole hearts, to sing with our tongues, to sing with our mouths. We pray that singing to you would be part of not only our Sunday mornings but our whole week as we rejoice in the Lord always. We pray these things in Jesus name, amen.