

**SINGING GOD'S NEW SONG OF SALVATION**

**Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**

Hear now the opening of the Psalm appointed for use in the Church this most Holy night:

*All of you sing to YHWH (a) new song; all of you sing to YHWH all the earth;*

*all of you sing to YHWH; all of you bless His Name; all of you tell from day-to-day (of) His Salvation;*

*all of you declare, in (the) nations, His glory; in all the peoples, His marvellous works.<sup>1</sup>*

As the Advent season began, many of you heard it said that this is, in this place, the year of the Psalm. For the past four Sundays (including today), and on Wednesdays, the Psalms of the week have been chanted, spoken or sung. As Advent ends, the Psalm of the night is used to herald afresh the birth of our long-ago newborn King.

Tonight, as the stars twinkle outside, as the temperature drops, we continue to hear of the joy that is ours in the coming of the Christ, the Messiah. Into our ears is declared that He, the Lord of the Universe, humbly came physically into His fallen creation. The Word speaks again, as Advent ends and the Christ-mass begins, of the long-promised Savior and Son of David, God-in-our-flesh. For us, in this place, that proclamation commenced as this congregation sang about the angelic announcement of Messiah's birth. That hymn called all here to come and worship Christ the newborn King. It provided a fitting opening that was to set our ears, hearts and minds on the wonders that God would again proclaim tonight!

What did that newborn come to do? Dear ones in Christ, you are called again to remember that all that is said or done in the Lord's Services is placed to lead hearers like you to proclaim Christ-crucified for the forgiveness of the whole world's sins. That means that even the words and music of the wonderful Christmas hymns do that. From them, tonight, we might learn that Scripture clearly teaches that the divine focus of

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<sup>11</sup> *Psalm 96:1-3.*

Messiah's incarnation and Virgin birth, the joining of His divinity with humanity might remain before us. From His Word, in hymn, Scripture and proclamation, we repeatedly learn that God would have us continually declare the eternal Truth about His first-born Son.

That Word of Truth is this: the Son of God became one with us in order to bear our sins, your sins, in His sinless flesh into death and the grave. He did so that you, we, might have forgiveness and life in Him. That is reason to lift up our voices in song, as we continue to respond to the Good News call of tonight's three millennia old Psalm:

*All of you sing to YHWH (a) new song; all of you sing to YHWH all the earth;  
all of you sing to YHWH; all of you bless His Name; all of you tell from day-to-day (of) His Salvation;  
all of you declare, in (the) nations, His glory; in all the peoples, His marvelous works.*<sup>2</sup>

The New Song of God's salvation was given to God's people centuries before His incarnation, birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension. God's New song of His Salvation leads us this night to remember that we are continually called to focus upon the Reason that we are free to have the true hope, peace, joy and love of any ending Advent season. The Divine means of salvation may ever be before us as we recall that He who had been wrapped in strips of linen at His birth, was much later, bearing on His sinless Person the sins of the whole world, wrapped in linen cloths and laid into a grave.

All of that, and more, we proclaim as we sing, chant and speak this Midnight service's hymns and liturgy. We have sung, and will sing, of our individual and collective desire to respond to our Savior's Presence among us. Thinking back to the Psalm verses that informed tonight's Psalm hymn, we recall that it gives us words, melody and harmony with which to respond to Jesus in our midst. It was composed with the midnight Psalm for Nativity Eve in mind.

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<sup>22</sup> Psalm 96:1-3.

The hymn, “Oh, for a Thousand Tongues to Sing,” and Psalm 96 provide the text for this sermon. That hymn in particular, we pray, began moving our thoughts and hearts to meditate more clearly upon the wonders of long ago that still ring out over all this fallen creation. Until now, have you ever considered that, “Oh, for a Thousand Tongues to Sing,” is a fitting Christmas hymn? (Our music planners did! We are so blessed in this assembly of sinner/saints)!

Tonight’s Psalm hymn truly reflects the wonderful news that the angelic host gave to the shepherds to proclaim. When it is coupled with the other 10 hymns for this Festival Service, we truly sing of God’s wonders to all who are here. (You who read the little footnotes at the bottom of each hymn will note that when we conclude this Christ-mass tonight we will have sung five English composed hymns, five hymns translated from German, and one ancient Greek hymn – dating all the way back to the A.D. 400s). As we go forth into the night filled with stars, those ancient lights that participated in the announcement of the Messiah’s birth, we bear such hymnody from this place into our homes and lives. In so doing that, we will be simply following that which those tending their flocks did after they beheld and heard angelic greetings.

We actually respond to those greetings as have those who have heard of Christ’s birth since the night He was born. In time, since A.D. 1740, the Methodist hymn that sets to music the thoughts of Psalm 96 has been sung in English speaking congregations. Charles Wesley, contemplating the new birth that Christ’s birth foreshadowed for all believers, composed 18 verses for thousands of tongues to sing. By about the year 1918, English-speaking Lutheran congregations had pared those 18 verses down to seven!

In the seven that remain, we reflect back to God, with our voices joined to those of the past three centuries, the strains of the first three verses of the 96<sup>th</sup> Psalm. Hear them again, and think about how hymn 528 reflects their light:

*All of you sing to YHWH (a) new song; all of you sing to YHWH all the earth;*

*all of you sing to YHWH; all of you bless His Name; all of you tell from day-to-day (of) His Salvation;*

*all of you declare, in (the) nations, His glory; in all the peoples, His marvelous works.* <sup>3</sup>

It is fitting that Psalm be the one sung in the Church as the Eve of the Nativity transitions into the Nativity of our Lord. From the Scriptures, we learn that its first publicly recorded use was by King David (around 1,000 B.C.) as God's Ark of the Old Covenant was brought into Jerusalem in victory (I Ch. 16:23-24). The Ark, you will recall, was the place where the shining Presence of the Lord chose to reside among His people.

In time, the Greek translation of the Old Testament texts records that tonight's Psalm was proclaimed when the Lord's Temple was rebuilt after the Babylonian captivity.<sup>4</sup> That year, dated 516 B.C.,<sup>5</sup> God's people rejoiced as His Temple once again became the appointed place to remember God's Presence. Five centuries then separated the joyful singing events of the 96<sup>th</sup> Psalm among God's people on account of His Presence among them.

About five centuries after that, the Church was given divine reason again to sing the words of this night's Psalm. (It is interesting to think about how patient God is with His people, giving them reason to sing in 1,000-ish B.C.; 500-ish B.C.; and 500-ish years later, as the years transitioned from Before Christ, to the Year of our Lord). In reality, since the time of our Lord's incarnation and birth, the faithful have been free to declare God's Presence in Christ with His people with this Christmas Psalm. Hear it again, as that for which we have so often prayed is read again into our ears for our meditation:

*All of you sing to YHWH (a) new song; all of you sing to YHWH all the earth;*

*all of you sing to YHWH; all of you bless His Name; all of you tell from day-to-day (of) His Salvation;*

*all of you declare, in (the) nations, His glory; in all the peoples, His marvelous works.* <sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Psalm 96:1-3.

<sup>4</sup> c.f. Ezra 6:13-18.

<sup>5</sup> *The Lutheran Study Bible* St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009, 730.

<sup>6</sup> Psalm 96:1-3.

As that Psalm begins, you may hear it call for all of you to sing, and as we have learned, to sing in God's Presence. That you have done, and will do more of this night. That is, if the Lord does not return on the clouds accompanied by the angels and all the heavenly host.

The Psalm invites God's people to sing a new song. That is a song given for all the earth. It is a song that calls for blessing God's Holy Name. It even gives, in the Hebrew language, His Name that you are to proclaim. The Name that you are called to *tell from day-to-day* is Yeshua: that is, in our language: Jesus! With His Name on your lips, the Psalm implores you to declare His wonderful, marvelous, surpassing, extraordinary works to all nations and peoples.

What can be more wonderful, marvelous, surpassing and extraordinary than God's taking on human flesh to save sinners, to save you?

That very Psalm proclamation may move anyone to song, in all nations, to all peoples. (It moved you to sing the words of "Oh, for a Thousand Tongues to Sing," tonight). Its extraordinary Word is of your Redeemer. He is the One Whose glories were heralded by angels to shepherds. From those shepherds, the eye and ear-witnesses of God's fulfilling Psalm 96, the Word of God's wonder of Christ's incarnation and birth were declared far and wide.

By you, tonight, God's wonders were proclaimed as you offered up the wish that God would give you a thousand tongues in which to sing your great Redeemer's praise. You actually asked Him help you in spreading that Word, when you sang, "Assist me to proclaim, to spread through all the earth abroad, the honors of [His] name."<sup>7</sup> In singing that, you were heard being faithful to the Psalm of this night, which continues to declare to one and all:

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<sup>7</sup> Stz. 2.

*sing to YHWH (a) new song; sing to YHWH all the earth; sing to YHWH;  
His Name...<sup>8</sup>*

Did you actually think, as you sang the Psalm Hymn, that you were fulfilling the Word of God given for proclamation in His Church this night?

The Word calls for you to be attentive to it in its entirety, especially as you pray, meditate, and wrestle with it in the Lord's Services to you. If you find you have not been attentive, turn, and remember to hear that which you sing. Let words like these: "Jesus! The Name that charms our fears, that bids our sorrows cease..."<sup>9</sup> actually be for you the music of the Psalms! Let them declare to you God's glory and marvelous works.

Chief among them is that about which you also sang this holy night, as you declared that Jesus, "breaks the pow'r of canceled sin... sets the pris'ner free."<sup>10</sup> Every time you sing "Oh, for a Thousand Tongues to Sing," you proclaim that "His blood can make the foulest clean," and that it avails for you!<sup>11</sup>

By now, you might wish that hymn was included in the Christmas section of the hymnal, and in our caroling book. "Oh, for a Thousand Tongues to Sing," gives you a simple vehicle by which to call all peoples and nations to look to Him for salvation, for their Yeshua: for Jesus for them!

It even declares why the Nativity of our Lord is so important. You did that when you sang: "See, all your sins on Jesus laid; the Lamb of God was slain, His soul was once an off'ring made for ev'ry soul of man."<sup>12</sup> God sent His Son for all people. He came to rescue you from sin, death and guard you from the wiles of the devil and his minions.

God's Good News of the Christ, the Messiah, Jesus is for every person, from every tribe and race (just consider all who have come to the Faith in just this one congregation since 1981). The message of the Psalm, as was the message of the shepherds tending the flocks of sheep to be sacrificed at Herod's Temple in Jerusalem so long ago, is the

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<sup>8</sup> Psalm 96:1-2.

<sup>9</sup> Stz. 3.

<sup>10</sup> Stz. 4.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Stz. 6

message that proclaims glory to God on account of His taking on human flesh to save us humans from our sins.

That means that we, to truly Sing Praise to God, we declare His salvation for all sinners, for all time, as His free gift. No matter what your worldly vocation is, you are called by God to declare His grace for sinners. That is as easily done as saying, “I forgive you,” to someone who repents of sins committed against you. Forgiveness, life, and eternal salvation in Christ is the new song of which we continue to sing, following tonight’s Psalm’s encouragement:

*All of you sing to YHWH (a) new song; all of you sing to YHWH all the earth;  
all of you sing to YHWH; all of you bless His Name; all of you tell from day-to-day (of) His Salvation.<sup>13</sup>*

All you have blessed the Name of the One True God this evening. For that reason God drew you here for this service. It is true even if your family, its tradition, holds this time for service dear. It is true even if you thought you were coming again just to hear the “Christmas Story.” It remains true among all the beauty of this place, especially during the candlelight singing of “Silent Night, Holy Night.” Merry Christ-mass!

**The peace which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus**

Eve of the Nativity Midnight Mass Sermon Notes (*Lutheran Service Book* one-year series)

Psalm 96; Isaiah 9:2-7; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14

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*Pastor Michael A. Morehouse*

***Soli Deo Gloria***

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<sup>1313</sup> Psalm 96:1-2.