

*Rev. Jennifer A. Gleichauf
Covenant Presbyterian Church
Psalm 98
Together for Joy
September 26, 2021*

One of the hardest things for me in this past year, with regards to worship, has been not being able to sing together. I know there are some of you who never really liked to sing anyway, but I've loved singing since I was little. I sang in school choirs and church choirs. I even majored in voice in college, which was where I discovered I didn't really like singing for performing solo roles, I like singing with other people.

Choir people will know what I mean when I say that what I love is the magic of making harmony and having voices come together to make something more beautiful than we could ever hope to make alone. I love the feeling of singing your heart out with a group of people and I love the perfect few silent moments right when a song finishes but the music is still ringing in your ears. I love the feeling of the beat when it courses through your whole being. I love that even when I'm not singing church songs, plenty of secular music still feels deeply spiritual.

And whether you like to sing or not, listening to music also has these same transcendent qualities. Whatever kind of music you love, I imagine there are songs which make you come alive in a way very little else does. Songs which lift you out of everything else and make you want to raise your hands or dance or sing along at the top of your lungs or even which make you cry. I hope you all have music which reminds you of the joy in the world and the joy of being alive.

This transcendent ability of music is not new in human history and we know it isn't new because of Psalms like Psalm 98. The writer of this Psalm knew the power of music and

how it can make us feel connected and alive and joyful and that through music our praise of God can be heightened. This is the kind of music Psalm 98 wants us to make. This is no dirge or quiet unmemorable song. Psalm 98 invites us to sing from the depths of our heart and to let our music be an expression of a joy which cannot be contained. This song is meant to come from the bottom of our feet, up through our body and allow us, even if just for a second, to feel connected to God and everyone and everything else. This song of praise is an invitation to bring our whole selves, our whole soul, and our whole body, before God in praise and gratitude and joy.

And why should we praise God this way? With trumpets and harps and singing and shouting? Well, listen to the words that describe God in this Psalm – God has done marvelous things. God is strong and holy. God offers salvation and righteousness. God is loyal and faithful. God establishes justice. Now that is a God worth some trumpet blasting praise.

But, if I'm honest, that kind of prayer, that kind of praise, seems like a far cry from most of my every day prayers. A lot of my every day prayers are a lot more habit and kind of perfunctory or basic. I mean, I give thanks for my meals. I give thanks at the end of the day. I pray for others. I pray for myself. But praying with the kind of praise the Psalm is talking about? Not nearly as often. My praise doesn't often equate with rivers clapping and mountains rejoicing and trumpets blasting.

And here we are kicking off another Stewardship year. And as we reflect on the year behind us, we can see that there has been good, but there has also been a lot of bad and sad and difficult and ugly. And we might be tired. We might be overwhelmed with how the world is opening and we forgot how busy our lives can be. We might be feeling unsettled and unsure about the future – the future of covid, the future of the economy,

the future of our country, the future of the earth. We might be feeling a lot of things and maybe praise and joy just aren't that high on our list. Maybe, when we manage to pray, our prayers are much more about worry and frustration and anger and fear than they are about praise and joy.

And if that's true, then it means Stewardship season has come at the exact right time. Because stewardship season is not really about money. I mean, yes, please do consider your pledge, and send it in. But your pledge is about making sure we can keep the doors open and the lights on and do the things we say we want to do together – study and serve and grow and welcome and celebrate and comfort and love each other and your pledge is part of how we do that together.

But the pledge cards are just a piece of this larger stewardship season which is really meant to be the time of year when we take stock and remind ourselves of our mission to come together to praise God; to come together for joy.

What do I mean by that? Well, let's talk for a minute about joy. Joy is not the same thing as happiness. Happiness is conditional. Happiness is getting a good grade on an exam, eating a delicious meal, a long talk with a good friend, a beautiful sunset. Joy is what the old song says – "I've got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart." Joy reaches deeper than our conditions. Joy sees the bigger picture. Joy is found in our believing that even if things are not alright right now, they will be.

This is not the same as just pretending everything is fine when bad things happen. It is not the same as turning a blind eye and trying to just glass half full everything. It's saying that even in the trials; even in the hardest times; we still have joy because we trust the promises of God. We have joy because we have seen other people go through the valley

of the shadow of death and come out the other side. We have joy because there are people who will stand by us and with us and hold us in prayer.

Theologian Henri Nouwen said, “joy is the experience of knowing that you are unconditionally loved and that nothing—sickness, failure, emotional distress, oppression, war or even death—can take that love away.” And scholar Moises Silva said, “our rejoicing depends not on changing circumstances, but on the one who does not change.” And James, from the book in the Bible called James, said, “consider it all joy, even when you face trials and tribulations.”

This is what stewardship season is meant to remind us. During stewardship season, we take stock. We try to get the bigger picture, the longer view, at least looking at the year behind us and considering the year ahead. Stewardship asks us to be intentional about looking at our lives – our blessings and our struggles, our gifts, and our losses – and trying to take in the full measure of it all.

Why do we do this? Well, it turns out, that on our own, most of us have trouble holding onto joy. We get caught up in our frustrations and struggles, our anxieties, and fears. We dwell in our own problems and wallow in our own regrets. We respond conditionally – when things are good, we can muster some praise and joy, but when things are hard, praise and joy can be trickier or even non-existent.

Which is why we show up here on Sunday mornings. This is where we come and hear the words that have been read for generations. Words that remind us we are not the first to struggle and we will not be the last. Stories which remind us we are not the first to see hard times and grieve and not be sure about the future. This is where we hear the stories about how the ones who came before us really messed up – like royally – like

huge, awful, seemingly unforgiveable things they did and how God was still faithful. God was still steadfast. God still loved them. We come here to admit our own faults and hear words of forgiveness. We come to remember our blessings and to think about how we are going to bless others. We come to share our lives with each other – our whole messy, beautiful, difficult lives. We come to have an hour in the week where we can step back enough and get enough of the big picture, to remember all there is to praise, all there is to be grateful for, even as we also see the hurt and broken and ugly in our own lives and each other's. We take stock. And the Psalmist knew, and most of us know too, that when we really do that, when we weigh all the good and all the bad, when we look at the beauty and delight and joy available in creation, even alongside the terrible and painful and broken, we know God is faithful. We know God has done marvelous things. We see God's justice breaking through. We experience God's saving grace and deep, deep love.

This stewardship season, we want to remember that we are called by God to come together for joy – not for a conditional happiness, not for a little bit of gratitude followed by a laundry list of complaints, but for a joy meant to uphold and undergird our entire lives; a joy that is the thread woven through our whole existence – ours and all who have come before us and all who will come after us.

So, during this next month, we are all invited to take stock of our individual lives and of our lives together and see if we can't discover more joy together. You'll hear, over the next few weeks, members of Covenant stand up and speak about their own faith journey, just as we have heard members speak every year for the last 10-15 years. We ask people to give these faith talks because they are an opportunity for us to bear witness to the joy of others. To see how others have had their faith deepened and

broadened and strengthened by being a part of this community and to consider the same for ourselves.

So no, stewardship season is not about money, (though again, we'd love you to turn in your pledge card), it is about taking stock and remembering who and whose we are, and it is when we make plans together. We make plans for how we will come back to joy again and again together; even when things around us are coming apart. And we make plans about how we are going to spread this joy, because the last thing we would ever do is try to keep it to ourselves. And we make plans for how we will be a place where we can all hear again and again the message of God's faithfulness and love and that they are not conditional, but as real as the air we breathe. And we make plans to be people who will bear witness to joy for others, especially when they can't see it.

When all is said and done, when our lives come to an end, even if the day comes that Covenant no longer exists – let it be said that we came together in this place, in this time, with these people, for joy and that even when we couldn't sing together, our song of praise was still heard in the beat of our hearts and the words we said and the ways we showed God's love and the joy we spread. Let us come together for joy. Amen.