



THE RIGHT REVEREND GREGORY H. RICKEL, BISHOP OF THE DIOCESE OF OLYMPIA
CHRISTMAS EVE, DECEMBER 24, 2021, 11:00PM SERVICE
ISAIAH 9:2-7; PSALM 96; TITUS 2:11-14; LUKE 1:39-55

SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

SING A NEW SONG

*Psalm 96 [Sing to the Lord a new song; * sing to the Lord, all the whole earth.
Sing to the Lord and bless his Name; * proclaim the good news of his salvation from day to day.
Declare his glory among the nations * and his wonders among all peoples.
For great is the Lord and greatly to be praised; * he is more to be feared than all gods.
As for all the gods of the nations, they are but idols; * but it is the Lord who made the heavens.
Oh, the majesty and magnificence of his presence! * Oh, the power and the splendor of his sanctuary!
Ascribe to the Lord, you families of the peoples; * ascribe to the Lord honor and power.
Ascribe to the Lord the honor due his Name; * bring offerings and come into his courts.
Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness; * let the whole earth tremble before him.
Tell it out among the nations: "The Lord is King! * he has made the world so firm that it cannot be moved; he
will judge the peoples with equity."
Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad; let the sea thunder and all that is in it; * let the field be
joyful and all that is therein.
Then shall all the trees of the wood shout for joy before the Lord when he comes, * when he comes to judge
the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness * and the peoples with his truth.]*

Merry Christmas! We can say that now. Merry Christmas.

I heard the other day someone say, Christmas is the only time where it is expected that you sit in front of a dead tree, eating candy out of socks. Of course, for us, gathered tonight it means much more.

Now, Tonight I am going to do something I don't do very often, and probably should do more, and that is preach from the Psalm, Psalm 96 is the one we have tonight.

Sing to the Lord a new song, it says. Sing to the Lord a new song. You might think of this as a heavenly pep talk. There are some similar Psalms, Psalm 29 for instance echoes 96 in many ways, but with a big difference. 29 is addressed to the heavenly realm, the cosmos. 96, the one for this night on the other hand, addresses the earth, us, you, and me, those who would be called faithful. Sing to the Lord a new song is not addressed to the angels but instead, to you, and me. 96 is telling you and me to sing a new song.

You might consider under what circumstances this Psalm was composed. 96 originated in a time and place in which many deities were recognized. Every nation had its gods and claimed them to have sovereignty. The Babylonians, for example, declared that their chief deity, Marduk, created the earth and ruled over it. All kinds of such claims were around in the time of this writing, and it is in that context this Psalm was written.

This Psalm, however, makes it clear that other gods are merely idols. That beyond their earthly image, beyond whatever those here believed about that deity, there was nothing. The end of their reality, their import, their impact on our lives here was just what you could already see.

Psalm 96 proclaims there is one God, only one, that loves us all, and holds us all.

You might think of it another way. The context in which this Psalm was penned was one of great chaos, doubt, and uncertainty. It was a time when people, even faithful people, were doubting because of all they saw around them, and wondering, if that one God, the God they had certainly heard was responsible for creating the heavens and the earth, of creating us out of dust, of being in complete control, even existed anymore. Or you might sum it up this way, many of the faithful, those on the inside, you and me you might say, were asking, Where has God gone?

I don't think it unwise to tell you, that thought has entered my mind, no matter how much I might push it out, over these last couple of years. I know I am not alone. In short, you might say Psalm 96 was written in a time very similar to the one you and I live in right now.

I mean, even tonight, some of us wonder, should I be here, in this room. Some made the choice not to come. We just don't know, this is our time, right now, of chaos, doubt, and uncertainty. We do the best we can, or at least most of us do. And into this time for us, comes this Psalm from another time much like it.

So, Psalm 96, and the intent of the writer of it, was to remind those of us who might harbor that doubt, that uncertainty, who may be doubting whether God is still in control, THAT God is still, and always will be, the one who "made the heavens" and THAT God is still able to secure the future for God's people, for us.

Now, I want to say we, us humans, living the cracked vessel reality of our human existence on this earth, are cunningly adept at sabotaging this message. We are masters at changing the subject, at adjusting the focus, as one adage says making God fit our image, instead of us fitting God's. We are so good at it.

Let me give you an example. I was watching a news story on the Russian buildup of troops on the Ukrainian border and the fear of escalation. The reporter said that both sides had agreed to a cease fire, because as they put it, "both sides believed there should be peace on the holidays."

Classic human intervention. Classic human reasoning. Classic human deception, denial, sabotage. You see, among the faithful, it is just so difficult to run up against this story you and I gather around tonight, where we peer deeply into this new dream and reality God has for us, where we are assured again each year that God is in charge, that God loves us all, that God will see us through, that there is something beyond all of this that includes all of us. It is so hard to be right

up against that, peace and good will toward all, as you threaten to kill and oppress them.

And so, we have seen so many times in history what I heard on that news clip. “Both sides believed there should be peace on the holidays.”

Here is the point of Psalm 96, and I would say the point of Jesus coming into our lives, and that is this. Peace is not just for the holidays, not for just when we bump up against the blatant contradictions in our life on earth, and what we say of our God. If peace can happen on the holidays, why not every day?

Well, the answer is, Because we always, always, eventually take over for God. When the holidays are over, that imaginary border has been crossed, we go back to our earthly ways.

The cease fire is supposed to be our life, our world, our way, not simply a reprieve or a holding off of our dealing with our contradictions. Not just a rest stop on the way back to our own desires, or our own wishes, or our own control.

Here is the point of Jesus being born in a barn, in Bethlehem, in the lowest of circumstances.

Here is the point of our faith: that what this psalm says about the world to come, shapes the way, or should shape the way, we live right now.

To live as though we belong to this new dimension the Psalmist proclaims, means that we work, here and now, to bring justice and well-being, just as God also is working.

It means we are co-creators with God, not passive receivers of God’s edicts or wishes. We are to sing now, today, not someday, a new song.

It reminds me of a cartoon I saw recently. It is two different screens or scenes of a speaker

speaking to a huge crowd. In the top picture he is asking them, “who wants change?” And they all have their hands in the air and they are all yelling yes, yes, we want change, we want it now.

And in the second scene the same speaker asks, “who among you is willing to change?” And they are motionless, silent, oblivious, just standing there.

As I have quoted many times, Margaret Wheatley’s quote, that in her life and her experience, people don’t fear change, they fear being changed.

And yet, this Psalm is about just that, you and me being changed, you and me singing a new song, you and me doing a new thing, being a different being, right here, right now.

There is a joke I heard the other day. I hope it does not offend, I never know these days, but it goes like this.

I wish COVID had started in Vegas, since what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas.

Don’t we all, and yet, it is in just these kinds of times when we, the faithful, those seeking to understand, those wishing to believe, those wishing to get closer, can see it more starkly, more precisely. It is in times just as these when God can become more of a reality, more deeply known.

I want you to think about this story tonight, the reason we are in this room, the reason we risked being here. If this story were to be lived out today, that baby would be born under a bridge in Del Rio, Texas, or in a holding facility on our border, or in a refugee camp in Jordan, or Kenya, or Syria, or China, it would be born in the South Side of Chicago, or the slums of Calcutta.

Wherever this baby would be born it would probably be born under occupation, as a resident alien, just as Jesus was.

This is a part of this story, a part of our faith that I find so many who claim Christianity, refuse to acknowledge, and certainly do not live out of. In short, they sing a different song.

One way we can sing a new song is to stop sanitizing this story, stop domesticating this Jesus, stop making God in our image, instead of letting God make us in hers.

What God does “for us” always arises out of a covenant to be “with us” always. *God with us* is not a political promise to provide “for” a balanced budget over the next decade.

God with us does not mean our God is more in tune with one party or the other.

God with us does not mean we get to make God fit into our selfish desires or expect God to do things God never said God would.

God with us is, ...Christmas.

God with us is much more like the story from Elie Weisel in his book “night” where he tells the story of watching a 5 year old boy swing from the gallows, he writes: *For more than half an hour [the child in the noose] stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes. And we had to look him full in the face. He was still alive when I passed in front of him. Behind me, I heard a man asking: “Where is God now?” And I heard a voice within me answer him: “Where is He? Here He is—He is hanging here on this gallows. . . .*¹

Yes, that’s it. God *is* with us in the present now: “with” those in poverty, the forgotten, and oppressed. Like the shepherds, we are witnesses to the presence of God among us, if we only have eyes to see, ears to hear, hearts to notice.

NO matter how chaotic things seem today, our future is still, and is always, in the One God of Love, the One God who sent Jesus Christ, in the most unlikely, the most earthly way. Our future, no matter what befalls us here is with and in that God.

Our song is not a melody of a magical God, or a God that believes everything we believe, who does whatever we ask. God is not Santa Claus though we contort ourselves every year, so much, to try to make God so.

Too often our own selfish song is pawned off as God’s song. Way too many imposter songs are being sung under the Christian and Christmas banners. This Psalm should come to us this night as a call, and as a warning.

We are singing the wrong song.

My people, sing to the Lord, a new song, sing to the world, a new song, a new song. Jesus Christ was born on this day. May a new song be born in us today, and may that new song carry us to a new life, this day, and every day.

My beloved, sing, sing, sing.

Merry Christmas! sing to the Lord a new song, sing to the Lord, sing to the whole earth. This is truly why we say Merry Christmas.

My beloved, ...Sing, sing, sing. Merry Christmas.

¹ Wiesel, Elie, “Night”, Chapter 4, Working Preacher, June 2, 2013, Internet commentary by Jerome Creach www.workingpreacher.org.