

Well, summer is here at last. That means an end to homework and tests, and for many of our children and youth, summer means going to summer camps. There's a tradition at many of our church camps that is used at large gatherings to remind people of God's goodness. This might be a stretch, but I think you can handle it. When I say, "God is good," you say, "All the time!" And when I say, "All the time," you say, "God is good!" Alright, let's give it a try:

God is good, **All the time!** All the time, **God is good!**

Amen. Good job. Many of you know that we'll spend the summer months looking at different Psalms. The book of Psalms is that wonderful collection of hymns and song in the Old Testament. John Calvin once said that the psalms are "an anatomy of all parts of the soul," which is certainly true, for in the psalms we find the full gamut of human emotions and responses to our relationship with God. This summer you will hear the diversity. We'll read psalms of praise, psalms of lament, psalms of thanksgiving, psalms of deliverance, psalms of comfort, psalms of confusion, psalms of devotion, psalms of awe and wonder, psalms of despair, and psalms of hope.

As we begin our summer series on the Psalms I think it's especially appropriate that we are starting here, in Psalm 100, a simple psalm of praise that says, **God is good all the time.** This brief song may sound familiar to some. Certainly not as familiar as the 23rd Psalm (that beautiful song of comfort), but as a song of praise Psalm 100 is perhaps the one of the most widely used. As biblical scholar James Mays says, "Were the statistics known, Psalm 100 would probably prove to be the song most often chanted from within the history that runs from the Israelite temple on Mount Zion to the synagogues and churches spread across the earth." This psalm, this simple song of thanksgiving and praise, has given voice throughout the ages to the people of God as they sing their praise and as a reminder that such praise should be, of all things, joyful.

As we discuss the psalms, it's important to remember that though we find these wonderful words written down in the Bible, they were originally meant to be sung. They weren't just "scripture readings;" they were the hymns of the community of faith. The songs sung in worship. They were the music of the people of God. It was with these in mind that the writer of Colossians instructs his friends to "sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God." The Psalter (as the book of psalms is often called) was like the hymnal for the temple in ancient Jerusalem. And Psalm 100, this great doxology, reminds the people of why it is that they sing in first place. As the psalmist begins, "¹Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth. ²Worship the LORD with gladness; come into his presence with singing." For us today this sounds like, "Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee" or "Joy to the World" or "Come Sing O Church in Joy." Our opening and closing hymns this morning are actually musical version of this exact psalm, and many of the hymns we sing throughout the church year reflect these themes of thanksgiving, praise, and joy.

These are happy songs. They are joyful songs. They are songs that call the singer to experience profound gladness within the worshipping community. They're songs that make you smile...even at church.

Now, I don't know about you, but for some reason that makes me little uncomfortable. When I think about worship-- this hour we spend together on Sundays, and the times in the day that we pray by ourselves and with others--when I think about these times of worship I have to admit the first thoughts that pop into my mind aren't necessarily joy or happiness.

Somewhere along the way, I've learned the "rule" that worship is supposed to be serious. I've learned that God's love for us isn't a laughing matter, and so I think I've subconsciously

grown cautious about too much smiling in church. I've heard the jokes about Presbyterians being so staunch and serious, and I've started to forget that these are, after all, jokes.

Have you heard the one about the guy... I know you have, because a member of this congregation told me this one. Have you heard the one about the guy who came to visit a Presbyterian church? During worship he suddenly felt moved by the Holy Spirit and said, "Amen!" Everybody kinda looked at him funny. Then, again he shouted, "Hallelujah," and people started to get a little nervous. Then in the sermon he shouted, "Praise Jesus!" At which point an usher calmly walked over to where he was sitting and whispered, "Excuse me sir, but you've got to get control over yourself." The man responded, "I can't help it. I got religion!" and the usher said back to him, "Well, sir, you certainly didn't get it here."

We laugh because we know something about this story sounds a little too familiar. Somewhere along the way we seem to have learned that we're supposed to keep a tight lid on our expressions of joy during worship. Somewhere we learned that doing things "decently and in order" was code for being quiet. So where on earth did this idea come from?

Well, I'm not sure. But I do know it didn't come from scripture. For in the sacred stories of the Bible we read time and time again about people who experience the goodness of God's love and who let their joy overflow into their worship.

Remember when the floods subsided after 40 days and 40 nights, and Noah was so overjoyed to be walking on dry land once again that he built an altar to the Lord to give thanks. Then there was Sarah, who laughed with joy at the birth of her son, Isaac, born to her in old age. Joseph wept tears of happiness when his family was reunited in Egypt. Moses sang a joyful song of praise when God freed the Israelites from slavery under Pharaoh, and his little sister Miriam played the tambourine and even danced along. Ruth and Naomi joyfully blessed God when their suffering had ended. King David danced through the streets in little more than his underwear because he was so overcome with joy that ark of the Lord had come into Jerusalem. After long years of exile, the people of Israel returned to their homeland and threw a marvelous feast to celebrate the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem. Then generations later, Mary and her cousin Elizabeth sang joyful songs of blessing when they shared the news that each of them was expecting a child.

Jesus' first miracle in the book of John occurred in the midst of a joyful celebration, a wedding feast. And throughout, his teaching, Jesus tells stories/parables that involve grand celebrations of praise, and people who act out of their immense joy. As he tells his disciples "I have said these things to you so that my **joy** may be in you, and that your **joy** may be complete."

As a people who's worship is grounded on the stories of scripture. We've certainly got a strong case for making sure our worship is joyful. The issue, however, seems to be how joyful. We're ok with some uplifting hymns of thanksgiving, but there still seems to be some innate, cautious worry about worship being "too joyful."

And, on the one hand, this caution is good. We worry for two reasons. First, we worry that if worship is too free-flowing and cheerful we might forget who we're worshipping. We might slip into enjoying worship so much that worship begins to be about us and our entertainment. Worship then becomes about me, the worshipper, and only what I'm "getting out of it," and Sunday mornings become little more than concerts that focus on enjoying the show. Now, I'm not saying that other Christians are wrong for having "fun" worship, but it's also not wrong for us to be suspicious and cautious because we want to ensure that our praise stays directed toward God alone.

A second reason that we are cautious about too much emphasis on joy in worship is that we wonder if such worship is really authentic. If we are to bring our full selves to God, if we are to “come as we are to worship,” then, well, simply put, we aren’t always joyful. Our lives are filled with stress, despair, loss, grief, sadness. I made a long list of scripture stories that tell us of people experiencing profound joy. But couldn’t we make an even longer list of stories about deep pain and loss in the Bible, beginning with Cain killing Abel and ending in the agony of Christ yelling from the cross, and echoing the words of another psalm, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” If worship is only joyful, then we could ask, is it really worship? Does it take seriously enough the reality of the world we live in? And, friends, as Presbyterians...no, as Christians we are right to question words of joy that don’t seriously wrestle with the pain of the world, as Christ himself did.

But, on the other hand, this is precisely why we need to hear and sing these words of joy. The writer of Psalm 100 says, “³Know that the LORD is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.” He confesses who God is and our relationship to God. Then, after reminding the community of this core belief that we belong to God, he is then able to joyfully sing, “⁴Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name. ⁵For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.” We are to sing thankful, praiseful, joyful songs to God, not in order to run and hide from the pain of the world, but because we know that in God, suffering does not have the final word! We make a joyful noise to the Lord precisely because we know that God is good and that we belong to God. To keep our voices silent would be to give suffering, pain, and death the final word. But as Christians, we know that God has already triumphed over sin and death. The Cross is followed by the empty tomb. Good Friday is followed by Easter morning. And we celebrate the good news, the good news, the joyful news of God’s triumphal love every Sunday singing “Jesus Christ is Risen Today, Alleluia!”

For us as Presbyterians, let’s remember that despite the stereotypes, joyful worship is not foreign to us. It is at our very core. The first thing that our Book of Order says concerning worship is, “Christian worship **joyfully** ascribes all praise and honor, glory and power to the triune God.” (W-1.1001)

From the Westminster Catechisms we learn that humanity’s chief end is to glorify God, and **enjoy** God forever. And more recently, our Brief Statement of Faith reminds us that “In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit, we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks and to live holy and **joyful** lives...”

And when we think about it, our worship really does reflect this sense of joy. You can even see it on your bulletin. What at first glance might look like an overly-structured, highly-ordered, traditionally-patterned worship service is in truth a Spirit filled expression of the joyful worship of our Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer. We gladly praise God for calling us here to worship in the first place. We confess our sins with the firm confidence in the good news that God has already forgiven us in Jesus Christ. We direct our attention to God’s word, read and proclaimed, and then joyfully respond by joining our voices in the creeds of the church. With gladness we offer our whole lives to God and cheerfully give our offerings and our gifts. We share in the joys of and pains of one another’s lives through baptisms, confirmations, weddings, ordinations, funerals, commissionings, and many other acts of the church. Every Sunday we lift the joyful noises of our voices to God through the songs and hymns of our community. Friends, our praise may not be spontaneous, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t joyful—a joyful response to God’s love.

I recently experienced this movement of the Spirit through in a very ordered time of worship. Last week I was in Clinton attending the gathering of the 5 presbyteries in SC, occurring a PC. For our opening worship service you could rightly say that all of Presbyterianism in the state was represented in one room together. And boy was it ever a Presbyterian worship service. We each had our white bulletins with the PCUSA seal on the front and our ordered instructions in black ink. On the back there was a detailed flow chart that showed how 1,000 Presbyterians were supposed to each come forward to partake in communion from 4 different stations—looked like something designed by one of Clemson’s finest liturgical engineers. Our structured worship service was lead by the moderators of all 5 presbyteries, we were welcomed by the synod executive, and the sermon was even delivered by the moderator of the General Assembly. It doesn’t get more Presbyterian than that! At one point in the service we stood to sing all 5, count them 5 verses, each in King James English, of the hymn “How Firm a Foundation.” It was traditional, it was orderly, and the Holy Spirit was certainly moving. Maybe it was the fact that I was sitting in between two choir directors from different churches, but when the organist played a long leading introduction to the final verse, all of our voices were joined in one joyful noise and we sang, “The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose, I will not, I will not desert to its foes. That soul though all hell should endeavor to shake, I’ll never, no never, no never forsake!” Friends, it will be long while before I laugh at a joke about Presbyterians being stuffy or boring, because I’m sure that the rafters of that building are still shaking from that joyful noise! The Spirit moves where it will, even in plain old Sunday morning worship services.

So, let us give thanks to God for the good things in life, for in doing so we direct our attention to God as the true source of our joy. Let the Alleluias come (just maybe not in the middle of the sermon). Let us make joyful noises and sing songs of praise to God for the good news of God’s grace and love for us in Jesus Christ, for in doing so, we let our voices join together in the joyful worship that is lived by people with true hope.

As we prepare to come to the Lord’s Table this morning where we share the sacrament of communion together, let us remember that this too is a joyful meal. For, as the apostle Paul teaches, in this meal “we proclaim the saving death of our Risen Lord until he comes again.” Friends, if that’s not something to be joyful about, then I don’t know what is. And as we say every time we gather round this table, “This is the joyful feast of the people of God.” So “Come with Joy” because after all, it is good news, joyful news. God is good, **All the time!** All the time, **God is good!** Amen.