

“I will sing to the Lord”

Psalm 104

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The psalms are songs. They can be songs of lament, songs that cry out, ‘How long, Lord?’ They can be songs of sorrow, songs that literally wail, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” They can be songs of mourning, songs filled with tears, “By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept.” We need songs like that, because sometimes life is difficult and disappointing. Sometimes we get discouraged. When we do, we have songs for those lost and lonely times.

And then there are songs of praise. Psalm 104 is a song of praise. The psalmist, leaning back and taking a sweeping view of God’s heavenly handiwork exults in the God who wraps himself in light and stretches out the heavens like a tent. He gives a nod of appreciation to the winds and the flames. He turns his attention to the waters of the earth, waters that flow as rivers and settle into the mighty ocean. Not to be overlooked are the animals, the wild array of creatures God has created, donkeys who walk the earth and the birds who fly so freely in the sky. This one who writes of God’s wonders wants us to join in celebrating the wine that gladdens the human heart, the oil that makes faces shine, and the bread that sustains the human heart. This seemingly never-ending chorus of praise finds full expression with the words, “How many are your works, Lord!” That’s not a question, by the way. That is a statement. The whole earth is full of God’s glory. As the psalm winds down, we hear this grateful promise, “I will sing to the Lord all my life; I will sing praise to my God as long as I live.”

Today, on the last Sunday we will be with you until we complete our Sabbatical at the end of the summer, I want to take the opportunity to join the psalmist in singing to the Lord. There is just so much gratitude and joy in my heart that I want to express, so I too will sing to the Lord.

On a day when our graduates are recognized and prayed for as they begin a new stage in their journey of life, I will sing to the Lord for the

blessing of having a church that raised and nurtured and encouraged me on my journey of faith. The First Presbyterian Church of Hanford, California was populated with people who modeled a faithful Christian life, who showed interest in me, who encouraged me, supported me, and prepared me to be a follower of Christ.

1969 was a year filled with memorable events. A little rock and roll festival was held in upstate New York. That's right, Woodstock was 1969. Speaking of New York, the Amazing Mets won the world series that year. Sesame Street aired its first episode about sunny days that sweep the clouds away in 1969, the same year that saw the premier of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. That year celebrities such as Jennifer Aniston, Gwen Stefani, Mariah Carey, and Tyler Perry made their debut as little bitty babies. Back in 1969 the Dow Jones Industrial Average closed at a whopping 800, a new house cost \$15,000, a new car ran you \$3,270, and gasoline...plug your ears if you are overwhelmed at how expensive gasoline is right now, but gasoline cost 35 cents per gallon. And as literally the whole world gathered around television stations on the day of July 20, Neil Armstrong took that historic first step on the moon. Oh yes, 1969 was filled with memorable events. I remember 1969 very well. That was the year my church gave little Wayne Eberly a bible. I carry that bible with me today. The pages are frayed, some are ripped. But on the dedication page are the names Frances Nicholas and Rosemary Knudson. Those two were my Sunday school teachers. I laugh because every time I would return home after I grew up, Mrs. Nicholas would look at me suspiciously and say, "I never thought you would be a pastor." Well Mrs. Nicholas, neither did I. But in God's amazing grace, he saw fit to call me, and I am so glad he did. I will sing to the Lord all my life.

I will sing because while my life of faith was being formed on the west coast of the United States, here on the east coast, in Westerly, Rhode Island, on the outskirts of town known as Dunn's Corners, this faith community was coming to life. What an uplifting story to hear of a bible study in the 1940s that led to the launching of a church in 1950, a church that was founded and built by the members of this community. Lorraine Beattie loved to tell me how in the early days, nobody had

anything, but everyone would come and share a meal here, the women cooking and the men building, and there was pride of ownership...or pride of membership, a feeling that to belong to a church was a gift and a blessing and something to be treasured. Over the years the preschool was established, the Westerly Senior Center had its beginning as a ministry of this congregation, the church played a major role in ministries like Warm Center and Jonnycake and Habitat for Humanity, traveled to New Orleans to do hurricane recovery work after Katrina, and along the way shared God's love and hope with countless members and friends.

I will sing to the Lord for somehow, in a way only God could arrange, this child of the west coast got connected to this church of the east coast, and we have been blessed to share seven years of ministry with you, seven joy-filled years of ministry.

I will sing to the Lord for when COVID hit our area and we had to face the multitude of challenges, God helped us in ways that were beyond what we could ask or imagine. When we could not meet in person a young man named Kyle miraculously appeared and he filmed our worship for five months. COVID put our plans for a new sound system on pause, and when we finally moved forward, we had added in money to allow us to have both sound and video. Once the system was installed, we have been live-streaming our services. Work on the Meeting House was completed. Our parlor was transformed into a nursery, and none too soon, because in the last two years we have had four new babies born into the church. I told you we pushed pause on our sound system, but no one pushed pause on our ministries. The support you all give to Jonnycake and Warm and Habitat has carried on all through the crisis. Our newly formed Mission Committee has helped to resettle two refugee families.

I will sing to the Lord for the privilege of helping to resettle refugee families. God told his people as they escaped from their slavery in Egypt that they should remember others who were strangers and aliens and refugees, and to reach out with compassion. Reaching out to others, like refugees, only serves to open our hearts in new and exciting ways. As our Mission Committee has continued contact with the

families who are settled in the Providence area, they found out transportation is an issue. There is bus service, but it takes several transfers for the refugee family to get to their work. Our group asked if a bicycle would help. The faces lit up. Yes! Now four bicycles from this church have been donated and refurbished, the necessary safety equipment of helmets and locks have been purchased, and soon there will be four new bicycle riders in Providence powered by Presbyterian peddles. I will sing to the Lord.

When we were making our move here, from Houston to Rhode Island, something happened that brought back memories of the first time I ever moved away from home. I lived in a small town growing up in California, a town very similar to Westerly, other than being 3,000 miles away. It was a great town to grow up in. But it was the only place I had ever lived. At nineteen years old, I moved to Sacramento, California, and I was scared to death. I had never ever had to make a new friend. I was bawling as I drove the 200 miles to a new home in a big city filled with strangers. I wondered if God would provide a way for me to make a new life.

In Sacramento, the town of Fair Oaks, within a few weeks I was working with junior high kids. I fell in love with the young people. One person in particular helped me connect and feel like I belonged. Her name was Susie. Susie was a little seventh grade girl. She and her family lived a few blocks away from where I was living, and Susie and a couple of her friends would walk over to the house I was living in and visit. That act of kindness opened the door to a friendship with Susie, her parents Tom and Ethel, her sister Cindy and her two brothers. That was the fall of 1980. The culmination of that special friendship came ten years later in 1990, when Susie, now a beautiful young woman married Brian, another young man from the youth group. By that time, I was an ordained pastor, and it was my honor and an incredible blessing to perform the wedding ceremony for Susie, my first friend in Sacramento.

Fast forward to Sunday, February 1, 2015, Julie nudged me on the shoulder and said it was time to wake up. That morning, early that morning, about 4:30 am, we began a journey that was filled with hope and expectation. That morning we began our drive from Houston, Texas

to Westerly, Rhode Island, to begin this new chapter in our life with you, the members of Dunn's Corners Community Church, Presbyterian. It happened to be Super Bowl Sunday. You Patriots fans will remember well. Yes, it was another successful Super Bowl for the Pats. Fortunately, America is filled with football fans. We began our journey to Rhode Island on Super Bowl Sunday. The highways were absolutely empty that day and we covered ground as we cruised along. Julie posted on Facebook that we had begun our journey. There are numerous routes you can navigate from Houston to Rhode Island. We selected one route that would take us up and through Tennessee.

Julie posted our route on Facebook. About ten minutes later we received a message on Facebook from Brian, the young man who married that little girl Susie from our church in Fair Oaks, California. Brian told us he and Susie had moved to Chattanooga, Tennessee. He wondered if there was any chance we were going their way. If so, they would love for us to spend the night. About eight hours later we pulled into their driveway and Brian came out accompanied by their two children. Susie stepped out the front door, smiling and welcoming me like she had done 35 years before. She is Sue now, a grown woman and a mother. Sue and Brian reminded us of their wedding and said they were preparing to celebrate their 25th anniversary. Wow! Then there was a knock on the door. We opened it and in walked Sue's parents, Tom and Ethel, who had also moved to Tennessee. No sooner had we given them hugs and gushed about how amazing it was to see them than the doorbell rang again, and Sue's sister Cindy walked in. She also had moved to Tennessee. We had left Houston fifteen hours earlier expecting to spend the night in some motel and now God had seen beforehand, had seen ahead, and prepared a homecoming with a little girl who played a central role in welcoming me to a new life 35 years before. It was one small way of God saying I know how to go before you and prepare things for the good. You are on a new adventure. Trust me now. I will go before you. I will see ahead. I will prepare a place for you. I will provide. Yes, I will sing to the Lord as long as I live.

That episode in itself would be enough, but there is more. Sometime in the late 1950's a young couple with their two kids made the journey north from Southern California, where the young father had just graduated from college with a teaching credential. He was hired to teach math and science in a little town in the Central Valley of California called Hanford. But this young family was so poor at the time they couldn't afford the high prices in Hanford. Somehow a dairy farmer in Tulare, California, heard about their need for a place to live. That dairy farmer invited this young family to live in a small house on his dairy farm. The farmer's name was Alan Asay, although to this day he has never been anything other than Mr. Asay to me. The young teacher was my dad.

Letting that struggling young family have a place to live while they got their feet on the ground changed the landscape of life for our family. Mr. and Mrs. Asay welcomed the stranger. Mr. and Mrs. Asay made a place for our family to find a home and find a place in a community. When I was born a few years later, the Asay's teen-age daughter Dawn was my babysitter. Our families formed a bond of friendship that was deep and lasting. Those types of friendship are cemented when you go through struggles. Dawn, my babysitter, the Asay's daughter, was diagnosed with cancer and died at a young age. That was a dark time for the Asays and for the Eberlys, and yet our families went forward, believing God was preparing the way. It was a rare graduation, wedding, or birthday that the Asays were not there to share the joy. In 2002 my parents celebrated their 50th anniversary. By this point my dad was in a wheelchair, could barely talk, and was just a shadow of his old self. How do you express thanks for a man like Mr. Asay walking into that room, coming over to my dad, greeting him with that beaming smile and taking time to remember all the old memories? Mr. Asay was a dairy farmer. When you drive through the San Joaquin valley the many dairy farms can throw off a powerful aroma. On the school bus and on field trips the other kids would plug their noses and make jokes about how bad the dairy farms smelled. But when I smelled a dairy farm, I was transported right back to Mr. Asay and his farm and his cows. I breathed in deep of that wonderful and memory-filled aroma.

On Sunday morning, November 16, in the year of 2014, I walked into the Crossroads Presbyterian Church in Waterford, Connecticut. We had spent that weekend interviewing with the Pastor Nominating Committee of this very church. We had fallen in love with the dear friends who made up the committee of twelve. We had never dreamed of coming to the east coast and we knew absolutely nothing about Rhode Island. But in the space of 48 hours, which included a visit to the Christmas Bazaar that you all hosted, and which we sneaked into incognito, in those few hours we realized that God was putting a call on our hearts to come and share in ministry with you. We really didn't need any more confirmation.

But on that Sunday morning I walked into the Crossroads Presbyterian Church in Waterford, Connecticut, and something happened that was just like a tap on the shoulder from God. Or a wink of the eye and a nod of the head. Or a God sighting. Or a gentle whisper that says, "Trust me. I will go before you. I will prepare the way. I will provide." I walked into that church and the first person who greeted me, the very first person who greeted me shook my hand and said, "Hello, I'm Mr. Asay." In my whole life I have never met another person named Mr. Asay. Never. Not once. And now on this day, when we were contemplating a change a major move, I was greeted by a man named Mr. Asay, a name that represents God preparing a way and opening doors and providing a welcome and making a home and supplying endearing and enduring friendships. What do you do when things like this happen...over and over in sweet and wonderful ways? The psalmist knows what to do. Sing to the Lord...sing as long as you live. That is what I want to do. I want to sing to the Lord as long as I live. Thank you for allowing us to share in this joyful journey of faith with you. This has really become our home, our spiritual home. On this last Sunday before our Sabbatical, I want to leave you with a little homespun poem I wrote about this beloved church that means so much to all of us.

HOME

*It takes a heap o' livin' in a church t' make it home, and sometimes to
fully appreciate it, you have to go out and take a roam.*

*Something like a pandemic can try to pull the home apart, creating
space and distance between all the loving hearts*

*And yet as soon as you're back together, sitting in the pews side by
side, that old love for your neighbor stretches out real big and deep
and wide*

*When you walk the halls and turn the handles on the doors, when the
windows are wide open and your footsteps walk the floor,*

*In each room you find a memory of a servant of the Lord, as if their
names were written on all the tiles and each and every board*

*The saints who taught the children, kneeling down on bended knee,
making certain each little one knows they were made by God especially
The smiling faces of the ushers, the singing voices of the choir, the
soaring sounds of the piano and organ, join together in our hearts to
light a fire*

*And when the words of scripture fall upon each listening ear, telling of
a God sending his Son who was so precious and so dear,*

*The good news of the gospel, that Jesus died upon the cross, makes us
bow in reverent silence, amazed that our salvation came because our
Savior paid the cost*

*Now at that church that sits on the corner that goes by the name of
Dunn's, that church is quite a collection of God's daughters and
God's sons*

*They serve dinners at the Warm, swiss chicken they do take, and many
a bag of groceries have been delivered to Jonnycake*

*When the plea goes out for workers, the spots get filled in nothing flat,
as hammers start to pounding at the homes for Habitat*

*Deacons, Elders, Trustees, the officers who heed God's call, embrace
each task they are given, whether the job be big or small*

*The sound of laughter can be heard as we drink our coffee or share a
meal, and when a heart is heavy this is a safe place for a tear to spill*

*The Coronavirus posed a real threat to our community, and yet the
Spirit of God kept us connected in blessed and holy unity*

*At our darkest moments we reach out, searching for a hand to find,
and lifting our voices together we sing with grateful hearts about the
tie that binds*

*Surely one thing we discovered in that long season of being alone is
that the church of Jesus Christ is not just a house it is a home*

*And no matter where we wander, no matter how far we roam, when we
come back to the church on the Corner, we come back to a place called
home.¹*

¹ With thanks to Edgar Guest who wrote the original poem entitled, "Home"