

A Summer In the Psalms
THE OLD 100TH FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

What do you think? Could it have happened?

The year is around 535 B.C. The place is ancient Babylon — or perhaps somewhere along the journey from Babylon back to Jerusalem — or Jerusalem itself. The person is — oh, let's call him Ebiasaph.

Ebiasaph is looking for a way to inspire God's people in their worship and service and gratitude. He is looking for a way to help God's people recover from fifty years of captivity in a foreign land. He is looking for a way to restore the right worship of God. So, Ebiasaph decides to pull together 150 psalms into a hymnbook his people can use when they get back to Jerusalem and start rebuilding the Temple.

Ebiasaph works diligently on his collection of psalms. He makes sure to include psalms written by King David and King Solomon. He adds some songs by the Sons of Korah and Asaph, because everyone likes their songs. He is careful to have a variety of psalms: thanksgiving, lament, praise, confession, encouragement. He loves and knows music, but he knows not everyone who will use the psalms is a musician, so he writes notes to the musicians and singers about which tunes and instruments to use. Ebiasaph even organizes his new hymnal in five books, an acknowledgment of the importance of the Torah, the first five books of the Scriptures of God's people.

Finally, the big day arrives. God's people gather at the site of the destroyed Temple, eager to rebuild God's house and their lives, eager to worship. Ebiasaph proudly presents his edited collection of 150 psalms and the Temple choir sings through a few of them for the congregation. After worship, Jahzerah and Nahor are talking as they walk home. "So, what did you think?" asks Jahzerah. And Nahor says, "Well, I don't understand why Ebiasaph had to put all of those new psalms in his book. What's wrong with the old psalms we used to sing?"

Presbyterians have always been known as a singing people. Presbyterians have always had many beloved hymns that expressed their faith through music and comforted the soul with their familiarity. So, maybe it's no surprise that Presbyterians sometimes resist the changes when new hymns are introduced. In fact, many Presbyterians fought against having the more contemporary hymns as a part of their worship. They liked the old, familiar hymns they thought were more appropriate to the worship of God.

You might think I'm talking about the introduction of our new hymnal, *Glory to God*, or the "new" blue hymnbook in the early 1990's. Actually, I was describing the reaction of Presbyterians in the 1700's to the hymns of writers such as Charles Wesley and Isaac Watts. These hymn writers introduced a much wider range of hymns and psalms to English speaking Protestants. Their hymns were paraphrases of scripture, including the psalms, and included references to Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Some of the "new and unfamiliar" hymns that 18th century Presbyterians objected to might have included "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing," "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling," "O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing," "Joy to the World!" "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," "O God, Our Help in Ages Past," "From All That Dwell Below the Skies," and "Jesus Shall Reign Where'er the Sun." Some colonial American Presbyterians even fought over including John Newton's "Amazing Grace." Such hymns were considered to be "human poetry."

Thursday morning, Karla and I spent the better part of an hour talking about plans to take to the session on the 21st about introducing our new Presbyterian hymnal, *Glory to God*, in September and October. *Glory to God* has some "new" hymns and plenty of "old" hymns. Of course, it depends on what you mean by "new" and "old." Some of the "new" hymns are many years old, they're just "new" in a Presbyterian hymnal.

One hymn that made the cut in the *new* Presbyterian hymnal is the ***Old Hundred***. We sang the "old 100th" for our opening hymn this morning. Maybe as Vera played her introductory notes, you thought we were getting ready to sing the "Doxology" early in the service. The tune of the "Old Hundred" was adapted or composed by Louis Bourgeois around 1551. Bourgeois had followed John Calvin to Geneva, Switzerland in 1541 where he was heavily involved in editing the Genevan Psalter. At one point, Bourgeois was thrown into prison by the Genevan authorities for changing some of the tunes of the well-known psalms! John Calvin had to intervene personally to have him released. Today the "Old Hundred" tune is almost universally used by American Protestant churches as the "Doxology" at the beginning of worship or after the offering has been taken up. One writer has said that the Doxology has done more to teach the idea of the Trinity than all of the theology books combined.

William Kethe wrote the words to our opening hymn, a paraphrase of Psalm 100. Kethe was a 16th century Scottish clergyman who spent a great deal of time in exile during the reign of Queen Mary because of his faith. He went to Geneva in 1557. He helped translate the Genevan Bible, which was the Bible the Pilgrims brought with them to the New World, because the King James Version was too "new." When he returned to England, Kethe served as the minister of the Child Okeford Parish Church in Dorset for forty-seven years. He also contributed the translations of twenty-five psalms to the 1564 Scottish Psalter. His translation of Psalm 100 became the most widely known and best loved. One church musician has said, "Ironically, this hymn, which is the most enduring and popular of the English Reformation, was written by a Scotsman to a French melody."¹

Presbyterians and the Psalms have been closely linked throughout the history of the church, both musically and theologically. In his book, *The Presbyterian Source: Bible Words That Shape our Faith*, Louis Weeks, writes about twelve scriptures from the Old and New Testaments that have been and are fundamental for the shaping of our faith and, more particularly, for the shaping of a Presbyterian identity. Dr. Weeks picked Psalm 100 from the 150 available and, in a chapter called “Shout to the Lord,” writes, “We should remember that the Bible formed the basis for Presbyterian singing, as it formed the basis of doctrine and ethics for the church. Psalm 100 gives a clear introduction to the scriptural songs.”²

Listen again to the call to worship and instructions we are given in the first four verses of Psalm 100: **make** a joyful noise; **worship** the Lord; **come** into his presence with singing; **know** that the Lord is God; **enter** his gates with thanksgiving; **give** thanks to him; **bless** his name. When we come to worship God, we are called to be **active**: make, worship, come, know, give, bless.

Why should we do these things? The answer is clearly spelled out in verse 5: “For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.” Another Swiss pastor, the 20th century theologian Karl Barth, wrote about how our gratitude follows God’s grace: “Grace always demands the answer of gratitude. Grace and gratitude belong together like heaven and earth. Grace evokes gratitude like the voice of an echo. Gratitude follows grace like thunder follows lightning.”³

As you were getting ready to come to worship this morning, did you happen to say to yourself, “I’m getting ready to be socially active when I go to worship this morning. I’m getting ready to make a bold confession of faith when I enter the sanctuary to praise God. I’m getting ready to set myself apart from the claims and the messages of the world around me as I praise God and give thanks to him for all that he has done in my life and in the life of this world”? If you did happen to think about those things, wonderful! And, if you didn’t, let’s think about what we’re doing here this morning.

In a small, southeastern North Carolina town, “going to church” on a Sunday morning might not seem like such a radical or socially active thing to do. If anything, around here “going to church” is a very socially acceptable thing to do, even in the 21st century. Maybe that’s good — if that means that people feel freer and more encouraged to gather to worship God. Then again, maybe it’s a little bit dangerous to our faith, if we think of “going to church” and worshiping God as just another social ritual in our lives.

For the people of Israel who gathered for worship, the question was not “Is there a god?” but “Who is God?” In their world where there were all sorts of so-called gods making claims to their loyalties and worship, God’s people lifted their voices in thanksgiving and praise and worship, and called all of the nations of the earth to acknowledge **their God as the God** — the God who created the heavens and the earth, the God who called them out of slavery in Egypt and led them through the wilderness, the God who made them his people by forging a covenant with them. In different words, Psalm 100 repeats the first commandment — “You shall have no other gods before me” — and

the bedrock belief of God's people — "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone."

I've said it before, I'm saying it again, and I will probably keep saying that the most important thing we do as the Wallace Presbyterian Church is gather to worship God. Maybe that sounds a little funny, when you consider all of the different things we do as individual Christians and as a congregation. But that's what we were created to do. Our worship of the one, true, living God who created us, who called us to be his people, who redeemed us in Jesus Christ, who calls us to put our trust in him is what grounds us in our faith, in our service, and in our life together as the body of Christ.

That's why gathering for worship, singing "the old 100th for the 21st century" when we go to church, needs to be seen as a socially active thing, rather than just a socially acceptable thing. When we make a joyful noise to the Lord, when we worship the Lord with gladness, when we come into his presence with singing, when we enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise, when we give thanks to him and bless his name, we confess to the world that we put our trust in *this* God and no other.

When we sing "the old 100th" from the 16th century A.D. and the 6th century B.C., it is because, now in the 21st century, we believe that God is good and that God's steadfast love and faithfulness endure to all generations. We believe this about God because God has shown us it is true, in the life, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

William Kethe's paraphrase of Psalm 100 included a fifth stanza that doesn't appear in our blue hymnbook or the new *Glory to God*. The fifth stanza expresses the doxology we are moved to sing to God even today in the 21st century because of God's steadfast love and faithfulness in Jesus Christ:

*To Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,
The God whom heaven and earth adore;
From men and from the angel host,
Be praise and glory evermore.*

Let us pray: We thank you, Lord God, for you alone are good, and your lovingkindness is everlasting. You are our God, and we give you thanks. You are our God, and we praise you with great joy. We thank you, Lord God, for you alone are good, and your lovingkindness is everlasting. Amen.

NOTES

¹Much of this information came from two online sources: www.cgmusic.com and www.olympia.anglican.org.

²Louis B. Weeks, *The Presbyterian Source: Bible Words That Shape Our Faith* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), p. 40.

³Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV.1, 41. Cited in Mary Louise Bringle, "The Theology of Glory to God" at www.presbyterianhymnal.org.