

*Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.
Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his
presence with singing. Know 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. Enter his
gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with
praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name. For the
Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever,
and his faithfulness to all generations.*

Psalm 100

MAKE A JOYFUL NOISE TO THE LORD

Beloved of God, I invite you to consider with me the trials of preaching. The labor of the preacher is as much a work of remembering as it is a work of hoping. He or she must recall the dark and stormy days of yesteryear when the people were sore oppressed by enemies without and fears within and it is imperative he fashion in speech the vision of God's promise of deliverance for without that vision the people perish. He must do it in a manner that convinces the stoniest heart and the spirit most hollow. He must ring the alarm concerning trespass and catalogue the terrible retributions and wages of sin. She should square her shoulders to speak an inconvenient truth to insolent and easily insulted power and she must do so fearlessly with a prophet's voice. He ought to mourn the dead and encourage the living, pray the prayers that hasten to glory the souls of the former and refresh the souls of the latter. By all accounts preaching is dreadfully serious

work before which any preacher ought to be transfixed and quaking with fear and trembling. But one measure of the beauty of preaching is that God calls only the foolish to this weighty practice for only the foolish dare to pick it up. Lo, these past twenty years this annual celebration of African American history and culture has acknowledged the centrality of the worship experience to the survival and flourishing of black people in North America generally and Staunton in particular. Each year it has paraded a different fool for the gospel before the people. So you can imagine my sense of slight that this is now my second opportunity to get it right.

So I beg your indulgence to reminisce. Do you remember the time of segregation's reign, when separate but equal was the rule from the highest court in the land? Do you remember how unequal the rule of law not only seemed to be but was? And was this not the period of time when folks lived on Stafford Street because it was understood that black folk worked on East Beverley? You remember surely that the school of necessity and not of choice was Booker T. and never Lee, schools named for historic figures who were divided by race and by condition, one a former slave and the other a former slave owner. Don't you remember separate stores and businesses, the time of black grocers and mechanics in addition to black barbers and beauticians? Come on, someone here recalls well enough how black guests

in our town had better know somebody who knew somebody who could put them up in their home because Stonewall Jackson was an unreconstructed slaver in his own day and the hotel bearing his name would not soon countenance the visitation of those slaves' descendants in a latter day.

We could go on in this way counting every offense, and measuring the sting of each insult but that is more whining than winning and I am most decidedly in the mood for winning today. Besides, if you are too busy whining how unfair the world is and how unjust your neighbors are you will miss the powerful movement of God to bend the long arc of history toward justice. I would rather remember that though separate but equal was an evil system of social organization, that under it black folk found a way to sustain themselves in sharing what they had anyway, and cherishing the good they made of believing even in a time of famine that God could make a feast. I mean, in those days we may have eaten wrong of the hog for long term health and we may have used lard instead of olive oil but did we not suck our teeth with delight after supper was done? The psalmist had nothing on us when he wrote of the Lord that he had prepared a table before him in the presence of his enemies. And though our schools were not the best resourced, the teachers who looked like us and lived like us, lavished care upon us both intellectual and moral. We were educated and edified whether

we wished to be or not. Indeed, so rich is our remembering that it is not surprising to hear even now, even now someone whispering, “those were the days.” And while it is not advisable nor even possible to live in the past woe unto those who fail to be instructed by it.

So in the current moment let me hook the golden link of our harried past to our promising present. Here is a word as fitly spoken yesterday as it is today. Let us just say it straight out. God is good. No other explanation accounts for what we have said and how we have said it. Look at yourselves right now, sitting there in quiet self affirmation, your lips curling in a smile to remember your old teachers and how love sprang up among you in spite of the malice that surrounded you. Why, your eyes are misting at the mere thought of the courage of your fathers and your mothers to secure their posterity against the ravages of want and the racism that was its crucible. God is good, first of all because God was good and remembering so fills us with the expectation that as God had been God will be.

Let this be our principle and our guide today as it was years ago. When people shout the disdain of their neighbors and heckle the president about generosity to the aliens within our gates, legal and otherwise, let us recall that God is good because he is on our side and on the side of the stranger within our gates. When folk are confused about their own just

deserts and would rather scorch the earth before sharing its produce with a hungry world let us extol the grace of God and God's infinite care of souls and bodies of every stripe and hue. When others boast of spilling the blood of doctors on a Sunday morning during the hour of worship, and others strap on guns to boldly threaten our sacred public spaces, let us remember the one to whom we all belong and that he who made the heavens and the earth made them and us too.

When truth is turned inside out, upside down and front to back, that is the time to do what every preacher is called to do and what every believer is moved to do by the sublime and all conquering spirit of God. You don't need higher math to understand this and the most unlettered among us has the urging in her to pull it off. But if you have the gifts of numbers and letters they will profit you just the more. I tell you no secret but let me make it plain, that the urge in you, so insistent your toenails would scream, that urge you hold in common with spider and frog, with every bush and every plant, with all the meandering rivers and all the broad seas of this earth. It is the gift of cedars that shout and the waters that clap their hands, a gift that animates every living thing that has breath and a gift that undergirds even the rocks and stones that cry out.

Let someone in the tabernacle of this tent say Glory. Make it plain that what we do to turn the world round again is to make a joyful noise unto the Lord, and that all the earth is with us in the enterprise. Worship him with gladness; come into his presence with singing. This is the truth of the matter. Worship in any other way is simply no worship at all, because when I consider the works of the Lord and all that he has done for me, my soul aches to shout and my spirit to proclaim that God is Good

When others forsake us and our enemies seek to defile and defame us, when the toil of righteousness becomes a cross too heavy to bear and the night sounds of the hissing of snakes and the menacing growls of panthers, then it is meet for us; “know that the Lord is God, that it is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people and the sheep of his pasture.”

I heard a man once say, “What is the good of worship when all the world seems to be going to hell.” On first view we may be inclined to agree that is exactly where the world appears to be headed. I say instead, that is when worship is best of all. Let the storm clouds come and let Afton Mountain be washed away in a flood, let the stars plummet from their lofty perches and may gravity its force expire. Still I will praise him because this is what the past has taught me and what my future has promised, that the Lord of all is at his very best at the heart of every storm. He is supreme in

catastrophe and all excelling during calamity. If you have ever been sick but you have been healed you know what I am talking about. If you have ever been lost but now you are found you know the joy I feel. You know too that it's a knowing you cannot keep to yourself but that you have got to let it out like joy bells ringing in your soul or like fire shut up in your bones. I want to sing a new song and to set it alongside the songs of old. I want a song of grace and blessings to join with songs of thanksgiving, songs that re-knit what hate has undone.

It's early Sunday morning and we have entered these open gates beneath a sun-splashed tent. We have all left our churches for this sacred abode, for wherever there is earth there is the spirit of God. The psalmist expressed it well when he said, "the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." This is why some of us can fondly recall life on Stafford Street and why we today must think what we might do to redeem Stafford Street tomorrow. The earth is the Lord's and all those who dwell therein, including Stafford Street. And if God is good so is all that God has made, including Stafford Street.

So, enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise and if everything belongs to God then we need not wait for Sunday and we need not wait until the work of the day has concluded but the song has taught me

to sing, “everyday is a day of thanksgiving. God’s been so good to me. Everyday he’s blessing me. Over and over, he’s blessing me.” We cannot but help to take the time to glorify him and bless his holy name. Suddenly our heritage of want is a heritage of plenty, our history of captivity is a history of liberation, and our memory of conflict is our memory of reconciliation.

Still I must admit that many of us tempted away from our daily observances of the goodness of God by CNN, by MSNBC and Fox and by the all consuming racket of talk radio will bemoan the churlish contentions of our politicians. We will lament the unwise counsel of the pundits and groan at the scurrilous misbehavior of our fellow citizens. We may surmise that these are prologue to civil unrest, the incitements of the cynical to dupe the needy to serve the wealthy. We may ring our hands in a sense of defeat that all is lost, that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, that the powerful will slay the weak and the unrighteous will annihilate the righteous. But the remedy is still the same. We believe that God is still on the throne and that “his steadfast love endures forever.” Say what preacher? Say yes. “His steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.”

Believing as we do we have this holy work before us, to accomplish the work of this generation, what God has left of good to be performed by our generation, to relieve the burdens of those who are sorely distressed, to lift the fallen, to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked and not just to visit the sick but to heal them too. Let us live sacrificially and honor the memory of our forbears. They knew how to give so that we might have and if they taught us anything they taught us to understand that the God we serve is a God who is able. How able? Able to make a way out of no way. How able? Able to make water gush from a stone and a sea to be split in two. How able? Able to restore sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf. How able? Able to staunch the flow of blood when the blood ran for more than twelve years in the woman with the issue. How able? Able to raise the palsied man from his mat and a girl from her deathbed. He is able I say and exceedingly able in the dying on the cross for love of the world, he is able to pick his life up again in love triumphant.

And if he was able then he is able now. How able? Able to lift the sons and daughters of black sharecroppers from the fields of discontent to the airy habitation of the clouds. How able? Able to inspire an ex slave named Douglass to challenge the accursed blasphemy of slavery. How able? Able to impel a woman named Wells to risk life and limb to protest the

impiety of lynching. How able? Able to grace the tongue of a young preacher named King to sing of the dream of national redemption to a doubtful nation. How able is God? After all these years consider who now holds the highest office in the land.

Who is this God you say? And I say, Yea, I even preach as foolish as I am,

Lift up your heads, O ye gates!

And be lifted up, O ancient doors!

That the King of glory may come in.

Then is our inheritance what James called a “harvest of righteousness sown in peace for those who make peace.” Here is the conclusion of the matter and of our remembering, of all our yearning and hoping. In the beginning God. I believe we should say it just that way. In the beginning God. When we say it this way we assert the nature of God as pure act. God is both noun and verb, which is to say that God is God’s own grammar, syntax and language. What is God? God is love. So what does love do? In the beginning love created the heavens and the earth. Love made the low and high places. Love made the wet and dry spaces, and love divided the night and the day. Love brought forth everything that was made and not one thing was made that love did not make. And love lived in the time of unholy

troubles and the troubles of the world assaulted love to kill and bury love forever saying that only the power of force could rule the world but then love sprang from the grave again to show that there is only the power and all the power that may only be found in the hands of love. And love prevailed in the beginning and to its kingdom there shall be no end.

So in my worship's reverie I now sing beneath this tent of sun ripened yellow, "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty! Early in the morning our song shall rise to Thee. All Thy works shall praise Thy name in earth and sky and sea." In this way my day's work is my day's joy, to praise the master from here below. For the Lord is Good . . . yes, he is good God is good all the time and all the time God is good. He was good twenty years ago and he's still good today. He is at his very best in time of trouble so I am not afraid of what tomorrow may bring whate'er betide. "God will take care of you; beneath his wings of love abide, God will take care of you through every day, oe'r all the way."

So my preaching will end where it began. So too a psalm winds its way by the enlarging circle from its beginning in praise to its conclusion in extolling the wondrous glory of God. Who brought us safely over the treacherous paths stained with "the blood of the slaughtered"? God Almighty, the "God of our weary years," the "God of our silent tears." Who

sustained us in the dark days when under the “bitter and chastening rod” it seemed our “hope had died”? He who “by his might led us finally into the light, out from the gloomy past, till now we stand at last where the bright gleam of our bright star is cast.”

If by now you had already forgotten what we have rehearsed all along let me remind you one more once as Count Basie would say.

God is Good Say Amen somebody!