

“Things Above”

Valley Presbyterian Church – July 31, 2022

8th Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 95:1-7a

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Colossians 3:1-4, 12-17

Twenty-three years ago this month, in July of 1999, I led the youth of my church on a mission trip to the Appalachian Mountains of Harlan, Kentucky. We spent the week doing home repairs in one of the poorest sections of the country: patching roofs, rebuilding porches, and repainting walls. Each day, as the heat index surpassed 100 degrees, we prayed for rain.

Well, this July, in Eastern Kentucky, the rain came – in some places, over a foot of rain in one twenty-four-hour period. Harlan – and other towns located at the foot of the mountains that have been stripped clean by coal companies – have been underwater for days. And while over a thousand people have been rescued by boat and helicopter, more than two dozen have already perished; and when the waters recede, officials fear they will find even more.

Sometimes, the truth of things cannot easily be seen. Appearances deceive, and human perception cannot on its own pierce through the reality that underlies them. Hence, evil often masquerades as good, slavery disguises itself as freedom, and to the human eye, God’s victory looks like defeat. God rules the cosmos, but the reality of God’s rule is veiled from our eyes. From where we stand, the forces of death and devastation can look overwhelming, even invincible. The world appears to be ruled by greed, destruction, and the raw pursuit of power.

To truly understand God’s world, then, requires more than just our senses. It demands seeing with the eyes of faith, illumined by God’s revelation. In New Testament language, this often means being offered a glimpse into heaven. For if – on earth – the truth is often veiled, in heaven it is clearly seen. Or, more precisely, if – under the present appearances of sin and death – earthly reality is, for the moment, misaligned with God’s truth, what God reveals in heaven is the true reality and earth’s ultimate destiny.

So, when the authors of Colossians invite believers to set their minds on things above, not on earthly things, this is not a summons to abandoning physical reality and focus only on the spiritual. On the contrary, setting one's mind on things above means viewing all of God's reality in light of God's ultimate truth. In means looking past deceptive appearances; seeing past the false pretenses of the present powers and authorities that result in violence and destruction; and dwelling instead on the truth of God's realm and the promise of new life in Christ.¹

Since *you have been raised with Christ*, the authors tell us, *set your minds on the things that are above*. (Colossians 3:1, 2) In Matthew's gospel, Jesus said, *seek first the Kingdom of God*; (Matthew 6:33) to have our imaginations shaped by the grace of Christ. Whatever we do – in word or deed – we do it in the name of our risen Lord. Rather than being deceived by what seem like the realities of this world, we live our lives according to heavenly promises of God.

Last Sunday, Missy offered heartfelt words about why we pray. While we cherish the words of the Lord's Prayer that we repeat each Sunday, we question whether prayers are always answered; what about all those people – like victims of gun violence or devastating floods – who suffer? Weren't they praying? Did their prayers go unheard?

Missy's answer – that when we pray, we are seeking to be made into God's instruments of hope and healing – put emphasis on the final petition of the Lord's Prayer: "thy kingdom come, thy will be done; on earth as it is in heaven." We pray for a transformed world; one of joy, peace, and love; and that we, ourselves, might be transformed to help bring this new reality to pass. We pray because God, in Christ, is always with us, to comfort, strengthen and inspire us. We pray because God's name is majestic on all the earth.

This Sunday, I want to tackle a similar question: why do we sing? In our first reading, the Psalmist invites us to worship, saying: *O come, let us sing to the Lord. Let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation. Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving; let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!* (Psalm 95:1-2) From ancient times, the people of God have gathered for worship in song. And to the Colossians, it authors – Paul and Timothy – say, *with gratitude in your hearts, sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God*. (Colossians 3:16)

¹ Ryan Schellenberg from *WorkingPreacher.com*

Sometimes we feel like making a joyful noise; sometimes we are filled with thanksgiving; but maybe not all the time. Maybe not when we are sad, fearful, or angry; when the storms of life have brought floods upon us.

I want to preface my comments today with a disclaimer: I am not a musician; I have never studied or played an instrument, like John; I do not have a voice suited for performance, like Marilyn and Diana; I do not have the same appreciation for different musical genres that many of you possess. I sang in the children's choir at church when I was in the second grade under the direction of Mrs. McGhee. For whatever reason, she did not ask me to join in the third grade.

But this does not mean that I don't understand the importance of singing in church: that I have not experienced the soaring wonder of being part of a congregation in song; have not been moved to tears by the words and melodies of our Christian hymns; and have not heard the voice of God speaking powerfully to me and to others through the spiritual songs of our faith.

In worship, we sing TO God, ABOUT Christ, and FOR each other.

When we sing – whether it is as a soloist, a choir member, or a pew-sitter – we sing to God. God is the audience, not the congregation. Music is an offering of praise we bring to God. Everything in worship is an offering – yes, when we put money in the plate, we call that the offering; we are bringing from what God has provided us to give back to God. The same is true of our prayers; they are also our offerings to God: offerings of praise, petition, and thanksgiving. This sermon is also my offering to God: it is for God and from God and on behalf of God. God is the primary congregation to whom I preach. In the same way, all our music is offered to God.

Because singing – like all that we do in worship – is an offering to God, we want to do it well. We want it to be pleasing to the ear. And so, we all have our own opinion about what psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs we prefer and sound best to us.

C.S. Lewis once wrote an essay on church music. He was dealing then, more than fifty years ago, with a question dealt with for centuries prior and even now: high church music or low church music; traditional or contemporary. And Lewis said, among other things, we should defer the decision to our neighbor. We should say to one another, "I want to sing what you want to sing." But then he writes this:

“For all of our offerings, whether of music or martyrdom, are like the intrinsically worthless gift of a child, which a father valued, but only for their intent.”²

Yes, we sing to God. And we sing about Christ. We could sing about anything: nature and creation, our homeland or nation, love and friendship. But within the Christian faith, we sing about Jesus. Think about some of the many hymns found in the New Testament. When Mary is pregnant with Jesus, she sings: “My soul magnified the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” (Luke 1:46-7) When John the Baptizer is brought to the Temple on the eighth day, Zechariah broke into this song: “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably upon his people. He has raised up a mighty savior.” (Luke 1:68) When Mary and Joseph bring baby Jesus into the sanctuary to dedicate him to God, Simeon sings, “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation.” (Luke 2:29-30)

Think about the Christ-centered hymns that we hold so dear: *Fairest Lord Jesus*, *Jesus Loves Me*, *What a Friend We Have in Jesus*. In Christian worship, we sing about Jesus. We sing with gratitude for the gift of salvation that has been promised to us and for the ways that Christ has been revealed among us.

We sing to God, about Christ, and for each other. When we sing, it is not solely for our own edification; we sing for each other. You never know what spiritual trauma sits next to you in the pew; what desperate prayers are being lifted up, what hardships are being remembered, what sadness has settled into somebody’s soul. You are singing for them. Your words of hope, of love, of assurance, of trust in God are just the words that they need to hear.

Many Sundays I have been too overwhelmed to sing: overcome by indecision or fear, joy or grief. Often, I have closed my eyes, closed my mouth, and just listened. At those moments, I may not hear the soloist or the choir. It could be someone, like me, who didn’t get the musical gene. But their testimony – sung in the words of some familiar or novel hymn – comforted me, ministered to me, spoke to me, lifted me.

O come, let us sing to the Lord. Let us sing TO God. Let us sing ABOUT Christ. And let us sing FOR each other. And in so doing, we set our minds not on earthly things, but on things that are above. Thanks be to God. Amen.

² As quoted by Dr. Dwight Moody, “The Prepositions of Praise”