

Sermon by Ted Mosebach
First Congregational Church
United Church of Christ
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Make a Joyful Noise!
(second in series, *Treasures of the Church*)

Ministry group recognized: Choirs

A few years ago there was a Christian rock concert at Six Flags which I attended along with the High School Youth Group and Junior Youth Fellowship. Christian rock music is no different in style from secular rock music. It is dominated by drums and guitars and electronic synthesizers. It is often fast, and concerts are very loud, at least it so impresses middle age ears. It might be difficult to talk to anyone at a Christian rock concert even if they are right beside you. Sometimes it seemed to me at the concert at Six Flags that the volume of the music was so high that it was difficult to hear the words of the songs. Nevertheless, from what I could tell, the young people were all having a good time. And that, of course, was the purpose. And by the by, really, it seems to me, that enjoyment of one sort or another, in the broadest sense, ought to be at least one of the purposes of any Christian event.

Toward the end of the concert identical stickers that could be put on a car bumper or window or door or something were distributed to everyone. The sticker I received I have displayed on the wall outside my office door with a couple of push pins. It reads, *God Loves It Loud!* Now, I don't know what you think of highly amplified rock music. It was overwhelming to me at the concert at Six Flags, but then the hill over which I am is now even way behind me. On the other hand, watching the young people that evening having much good fun around the music made me think that maybe the writers of the sticker were on to something. Maybe God does love it loud. Sometimes.

That idea might not be far afield from what was expressed in the 100th Psalm. *Make a joyful noise, all the earth, worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing.* Now, what do you think? Was the cultural experience behind the 100th Psalm different in essence from the Christian rock concert I attended? Considering those first lines of the Psalm, what is the image we might get about how those ancient Israelites worshipped? Certainly they did not have amplified musical instruments but they did have trumpets and drums. They did know how to shout. The New International Translation of scripture renders the first line of the Psalm, *Shout for Joy to the Lord!* The ancient Israelites also knew how to sing and the Psalm writer seems to say, *let it go!*

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing.

Sometimes, at least, those lines may suggest that we just let it go! Not hold back. Not be self-conscious. Not be mindful that others might think strangely of us. Remember when an overjoyed King David was with the contingent that brought the Arc of the Covenant back to Jerusalem. The Arc was the great symbol of the presence of God so that as long as it was within Israel's territory the people believed God would also be with them. As part of the parade that was formed as the Arc was carried into Jerusalem, David became so excited that he bared his torso and publically danced with joy! One of his wives, Michal, who was a daughter of King Saul, chastised David for making a spectacle of himself in front of everyone. We read in II Samuel 6:20 *But Michal the daughter of Saul came out to meet David, and said, 'How the King of Israel honored himself today, uncovering himself today before the eyes of his servants maids, as any vulgar fellow might shamelessly uncover himself.* The story goes on to reveal that after that Michal could have no children. Her womb was barren, perhaps as to reflect a barren soul, which made it difficult for her to express and perhaps even to just experience, spiritual joy. If we can't get excited about the God of love and majesty who cares for us always although in ways we don't always understand, who is ultimately responsible for every good thing we have ever had, if we can not get excited that God, when can we get excited? And sometimes its fun just to let it out, just to let good feelings express themselves. Psychologists tell us that a basic principle of emotional health is the capacity to acknowledge and express our feelings in non-destructive ways; especially, the 100th Psalm might suggest, our positive feelings! And due to the intimate connection of the mind, body, and soul, it is now understood by psychologists and physicians alike, that to acknowledge all of our feelings, and then to express if not all of them at least the most important of them, at appropriate times in non-destructive ways, is good for us not just emotionally and spiritually, but physically as well! Make a joyful noise! Worship the Lord with gladness! Come into his presence with singing! God loves it loud and it's good for us! Sometimes.

Within the tradition of the Native American Pueblo of the Rio Grand Valley of New Mexico there is the ritual known as the Spirit Quest. In a Spirit Quest, a young man journeys alone into the desert. Through an experience there of solitude, extraordinary physical rigor, and half starvation, the young man would have visions, often of an animal that would speak wisdom to him. That animal became his spirit animal, and would always be with him to guide him successfully through life. (There is also a rich Judean/Christian tradition of spiritual experiences in the desert. Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness of what is now called the Negev desert, his experience there what we know as the three temptations of Christ.)

This summer in the high mountain desert of northern New Mexico I set out on a sort of Spirit Quest of my own. As I am a Christian thoroughly grounded in Christian

theology I was not comfortable seeking out my spirit animal in the Pueblo way but in a very United Church of Christ way, I wondered what I might hear the Still Speaking God say to me in the desert. As I hiked alone along a trail that led up to what is called Kitchen Mesa I was taken by the quiet and stillness until I was up over half way. Then I heard the rasping caws and saw the black bodies of what looked like crows soaring upon the wind to and fro along the cliff wall where they built their nests in the holes chiseled into the sandstone by the wind and rain. I learned later that the birds were actually ravens. What a racket they made! They rode the wind currents as do the eagle and the hawk and the gull. But usually no one was there to see them or hear them. I felt almost as if I was intruding on them. And the question occurred to me, why all this noise that almost no one could hear, why all this magnificent soaring that almost no one could see? But then I thought, of course there is One who always hears them and there is One who always sees them. If nothing else, a person might get a sense while alone in the desert, that everything is not about him or herself, it's not even always about us humans all together. In this case it was about the ravens and God. It came to me, inarticulately at the time and more rationally now, that the ravens and God had their own thing going. Could the noise of those ravens be a joyful noise, and could they in their way be making a joyful noise unto the Lord? And I felt while watching and listening to them do it, that in their own raven way, they were happy.

On another day I set out on a trail which led to a point called Chimney Rock. Arriving at the pinnacle I sat down to rest taking in the endless vistas of desert browns and blue sky colors that surrounded me in every direction. Suddenly I heard what sounded like a small jet engine quickly approaching. There was a brief moment I even tensed thinking, *come on, I can't be that high*. It was a loud vibrating windy sound, and then I saw it as it passed me, darting quickly right then left down and up and around the rock outcropping. I was told afterward that what I saw was a bird called the white throated swift. I never saw its throat but it sure was swift. Once more I considered that no one was there to hear it until I arrived. No one was there to hear the sound of the air left swirling crashing in the aftermath of the bird's flight. No one was there to hear it make its great thrilling noise but me for the moment and the Creator every time it flew.

One more quick bird story. On another day, in a mountain meadow, this time while hiking with a group, we saw in one of the few standing trees in the meadow two blue birds the very color of the sky. So dazzling was the hue that I stopped and stared in awe. The color of the birds was bright, it was glistening, it was loud, and God sees it every day. I think God loves it loud. Sometimes.

Thank you choir for making a joyful noise to the Lord each week and for helping the rest of us do so too as you lead us in singing songs and hymns.

Thank you for your soft and quiet musical times and for your joyful crescendos.

I wonder if you do not agree with me, that God loves it loud. Sometimes.