

I Will His Gates With Praise

Text: Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22

James 5:13-20 (Series B. 16th Sunday after Pentecost) Ps. 124

Mark 9:38-50

"Come, let us praise the Lord! Let us sing for joy to God, who protects us!

Let us come before him with thanksgiving and sing joyful songs of praise...

Come let us bow down and worship him; let us kneel before the Lord our Maker.

He is our God; we are the people he cares for, the flock for which he provides." Ps. 95:1-2, 6-7

Six-year-old Angela and her four-year-old brother Jonathan were sitting together in Church. Jonathan giggled, sang, and talked out loud. Finally, his big sister had had enough. "You're not supposed to talk out loud in Church." "Why? Who's going to stop me?" Jonathan asked. Angela pointed to the back of the church and said, "See those two men standing by the door? They're the hushers."

In spite of Angela's warning there are times when it is good to make a lot of noise in the church. In fact, the text that I just read from Psalm 95 can also be translated, *O come, ... let us make a joyful noise...*"

Church bells, musical instruments, shouts of praise, choirs and congregational singing have been part of worship of God for more than four thousand years. Throughout the Bible, we find encouragement to come together to worship the Lord our God. It is quite clear that from the days of Moses when the people gathered in the tent-church, the tabernacle, to worship God.

They made it a priority to come together to meet with God and respond with praise and lives dedicated to God. The Old Testament psalmists – the ancient hymn writers encouraged early worshippers and called them to praise God saying,

"Come, let us praise the Lord! Let us sing for joy to God, who protects us!
Let us come before him with thanksgiving and sing joyful songs of praise"

"Sing hymn of praise to the Lord, play music on the harp to God."

"Praise him with dancing, play drums and harps in praise of him."

"Praise him with loud cymbals. Praise the Lord, all living creatures"

(Psalms 95:1-2, 147:7, 149:3, 150:6).

This emphasis on coming together for worship continued into the New Testament. St Paul says to an early Christian congregation, "*Christ's message in all its richness must live in your hearts. ...Sing psalms, hymns, and sacred songs; sing to God with thanksgiving in your hearts*" (Colossians 3:16).

Throughout the Scriptures God's people are encouraged to meet together in tabernacles, temples, synagogues, and churches to sing and shout about the greatness of our God. This call to praise-filled worship has come down the centuries to us today. This morning and every time we come to worship we respond to the ancient call – *Enter his gate with thanksgiving in our heart "Let us sing for joy to God Come let us bow down and worship him; ...*

When we come here to worship with our fellow Christians we are first of all coming to meet God. The tabernacle and temple of the Old Testament were places where the people went to meet God. When we come into this church we are coming into the presence of God.

We know that God is everywhere but this place has been especially set aside - consecrated - as a place where God and his people can meet together. In this meeting place God speaks to us. As we listen to what he has to say to us through his Word and receive the Sacraments - he *forgives* us for all the times we have rejected and ignored his ways.

God *comforts* and *encourages* us when the troubles of our lives seem almost too much to bear, he *warns* us when we are being side tracked off the straight and narrow, when we lose sight of what is really important in this life, he *declares* his never-ending, undeserved love for us especially those times when we can see no good in ourselves or we are depressed because of the way we have messed things up in our lives, families, amongst our friends. God *reminds* us of his constant presence and help when there seems to be no end to the troubles we are facing.

We might have said or perhaps you've heard someone else say at the end of a worship service – "Well, I didn't get very much out of that!" That may be a true feeling but I wonder why someone would feel like that.

The Word of God was spoken, the Sacrament was received. There are probably a number of reasons why a person would feel as if he/she didn't get anything out of worship. It might have something to do with the way the message was presented.

As the pastor shook hands with the congregation leaving the church, a little boy looked up with a closed fist said, "Here, I have something for you." The pastor opened his hand and the little boy dropped a small coin into it. Not wanting to hurt the boy's feelings he simply smiled and said, "Thank you."

Well, it did not end - the next Sunday and the next - the same thing happened. Finally, it got the better of the pastor; he wanted to know what was up. He called the boy aside and talked with him, "I really appreciate the gifts but why are you doing it?" "Well" said the boy, "I just wanted to help you - my dad says you are the poorest preacher we have ever had." (*If people start giving me money at the door, I'll get the hint*).

A wise mechanic-friend once said to me, *"It doesn't matter how poorly a sermon is preached, or how dry it might be, it is still the Word of God and it is up to us to look past the preacher and hear God speaking.*" On the other hand, the preacher may be another Billy Graham and still we say that *"we don't get anything out of it"*. It might be that we, the hearers, have something wrong with us and we block out what God is trying to say to us.

God speaks in our ears that he is ready and willing to help us find our way through trouble and sickness. I might say that sometimes we just don't hear what is being said because we are too absorbed in our own difficulties. God declares his forgiveness in a clear and unmistakable fashion but we don't hear it because we are so absorbed in guilt and self-pity.

God proclaims his deep, deep love for us as he reminds us of the cross, but we are so distracted that the message doesn't sink in. Friends in Christ, it's not that God isn't speaking to us. Sunday after Sunday he comes close to us, he speaks to us clearly, and brings us the great gifts of forgiveness, love, life and salvation.

It seems that there are certain roadblocks preventing us from hearing what God has to say. It follows then that if we don't listen to God speaking to us we will find it harder to get excited about coming to worship. If we don't appreciate what God is doing for us then we find it harder to see any purpose in coming into the presence of God and being enthusiastic and joyful as we sing songs of praise in our worship.

The Sunday after Sept. 11, 2001 churches across the land were filled with worshippers. For most the first time in church in many years, to some it was time to get right with God, we do not know, we could be next to be attacked. But when the Americans begun to rain bombs on the Talibans in Afghanistan.

There was a sigh of relief, we gained our confidence and security and once again God was put back to where he belongs on the shelf and life returned to usual. God was put back on the shelf until the next crisis Worship means more than just coming to the house of God in times of crisis. I believe God must be worshiped for who God is, and not what he does.

"*Worship*" means that we regard someone so highly for what that person has done for us that we are filled with joy and can only speak that person's praises and give thanks. In Psalm 95, the writer is putting into words how he feels about God. He intentionally and deliberately gives vigorous and heartfelt praise for who God is and for all he has done and invites us to do the same. He says,
Come let us bow down and worship him; let us kneel before the Lord our Maker. He is our God; we are the people he cares for, the flock for which he provides."

The psalmist is breaking out in a song of praise, praise of God for all the ways he has shown his love to his people. God is our Maker and from him flow all the good things of this life. God is with us and we receive so many blessings from his hand - blessings of good health, loving family, peace in our land, fine weather, good leaders in the community and the church. The Lord is to be praised because he is there even when we don't recognize he is there - he is there in our doubts, our times of searching.

He is there when we are down and feel we can't go down any further. He is there when we are terrified of the future. He is there even when we wonder whether he really cares about us. He is there in our deepest agony.

He is there to reassure us of his love and to give us the courage, the patience, the determination to see our troubles through to the end. He will walk with us even *"through the valley of death."*

It's no wonder Paul encourages us to come together in worship and *"sing palms, hymns and sacred songs; sing to God with thanksgiving in our hearts."* Our worship is a celebration of God's love and everything that God has done for us. When we find that worship is a drag or that it takes an enormous effort to get ourselves to come together with our fellow believers to worship you can bet that we have lost sight of goodness of God.

Too often we take God for granted. We ignore his goodness and graciousness. We forget so easily his blessings when in the middle of some trouble. We have a wonderful God. He forgives us for the many times we think that coming into his presence isn't important or we are distracted when he is speaking to us.

He continually showers so many blessings on us. Therefore*Let us enter his gates with thanksgiving in our hearts, I will enter courts with praise...."Come, let us praise the Lord! Let us come before him with thanksgiving and sing joyful songs of praise... Amen.*