

Worship (Part Two)

“Sing to the Lord a new song”

Reflection 60 in the series “A New World in the Morning”

In aspiring to worship that inspires faith and love, that leads us toward a great global spiritual awakening, what’s at stake is our view of God. So let’s turn again to Psalm 98 and the way the psalmist here and in many other psalms just breaks into spontaneous, uninhibited celebration of a God the psalmist knows is loving and good. Now what I want to learn is how to really celebrate God. But I’m not quite sure that my heart knows how.

For too long I have been told that what really matters is what can be known about God, so there is no awe, no mystery, just knowledge. What I was not told when I was growing up was that in gatherings like this we are in the presence of a God beyond words, beyond our comprehension, a God who can explode out of all the boxes in which we try to confine him, a God of dazzling glory, incredible power, and infinite mystery, before whom (Revelation 4:10 tells us) we lay down our crowns. We can only respond with radical amazement.

One day I want to celebrate life and the God who gives it to us with utter abandon, to really let go deep inside, to let go of all the fear and angst and inhibition and self-consciousness and be overwhelmed by God. One day I want to get really emotional about God. I want to overcome hundreds of years of cultural conditioning – the fact that I am white, Anglo-Saxon and a child of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment who has been taught to be skeptical of emotion.

I remember the story of David in 2 Samuel 6 bringing the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem. What does he do? He celebrates. He celebrates with songs and harps, tambourines, cymbals and trumpets, with food for everyone, and seemingly endless offerings, but also by leaping and dancing before the Lord, wearing only a linen apron. His wife was embarrassed. But David was just being spontaneously, innocently, completely uninhibited in his joy before his God.

One day I want to be that enthused, that exhilarated by God, that carried away, that spontaneously myself with God, that energized by God, that full of God’s life in me. I want to find in laughter and celebration the strength to do the hard, hard things God also asks me to do: to forgive, to love my enemies, to live simply so that I might give generously to the so many who need it, to put my life on the line for others. And when this happens I will only have become what I was created to be. Barbara Ehrenreich in her book *Dancing in the Streets: A History of Collective Joy* tells us that all indigenous peoples of the world know how to dance; they know how to celebrate life and the sacred in life and their unity with one another with the rhythm of their bodies. In such gatherings they learned to love dozens of people at a time and celebrated the miracle of their togetherness. So Jesus came calling himself “the true vine,” in effect, the new Dionysius; he himself turned water into wine and his first disciples knew how to celebrate with overwhelming joy. They gathered for love feasts and even (historians now tell us) sometimes danced in church for the first 300 years or so.

But then Christians began to breathe in the sadness and sterility of a dying empire. They dreamed up notions like original sin (“we’re all born bad”). They became grimly joyless. They saw God more as a judge than a loving parent. They understood justice as simply vengeance. The gospel they thought was only “for a few.” And naturally laughter and celebration disappeared from Christian experience. Joy was postponed to an afterlife. No longer was anyone celebrating with overwhelming joy. And no longer did anyone have the energy to get on with saving, rescuing, healing and transforming the world. Ehrenreich concludes that we are born with the capacity for collective joy. It’s encoded in us. We can live without it, as most of us do, but only by giving way to sadness we were never meant to have.

So as one who was taught at first not to dance, I would now wish with Lee Ann Womack for all of you and for our children and our children’s children, “I hope you dance.” You may remember some of the words:

I hope you never lose your sense of wonder
 You get your fill to eat
 But always keep that hunger
 May you never take one single breath for granted
 God forbid love ever leave you empty handed

I hope you still feel small
 When you stand by the ocean
 Whenever one door closes, I hope one more opens
 Promise me you'll give faith a fighting chance

And when you get the choice to sit it out or dance
 I hope you dance
 I hope you dance

Or as the Psalms end, in the words of Psalm 150 –

“Praise the Lord.

Praise God in his sanctuary,
 praise him in his mighty heavens.

...

Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet,
 praise him with the harp and lyre,
 praise him with tambourine and dancing,
 praise him with the strings and flute,
 praise him with the clash of cymbals,
 praise him with resounding cymbals.
 Let everything that has breath praise the Lord.”

May we live to see a new world in the morning. May we awaken to the early signs of its coming that are all around us, a new world inspired by joy, by heartfelt, spontaneous worship of the God is loving and good.

To this we are called. Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Work for the unity of God's church worldwide. So on issue after issue, yes, respect tradition, respect the scruples of others, but also respect and enjoy, thoroughly enjoy, the gifts of others, those who are never closer to God than when giving back to him their life-long gift of making music. Stop. Look. See. Love one another. Love all the people of the world in all their marvelous diversity. Worship God. Let everything that has breath praise the Lord.

– Dale Pauls