

# 1<sup>ST</sup> SUNDAY IN ADVENT

DECEMBER 1, 2013

## LET THE MOUNTAINS SING TOGETHER FOR JOY!

Pastor Jim Dunn (With much thanks to Glenn Nielsen)

### Psalm 96

#### Worship in the Splendor of Holiness

- 96** Oh sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth!
- 2** Sing to the Lord, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day.
- 3** Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples!
- 4** For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised; he is to be feared above all gods.
- 5** For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols, but the Lord made the heavens.
- 6** Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.
- 7** Ascribe to the Lord, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength!
- 8** Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; bring an offering, and come into his courts!
- 9** Worship the Lord in the splendor of holiness; tremble before him, all the earth!
- 10** Say among the nations, "The Lord reigns! Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved; he will judge the peoples with equity."
- 11** Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
- 12** let the field exult, and everything in it! Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy
- 13** before the Lord, for he comes, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness, and the peoples in his faithfulness.

Every storyteller knows that you don't begin a story by giving away its climax. Not if you want to hold the listener's interest. So, you don't begin Advent and you don't begin the month of December by already telling the Christmas story.

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What can help us not peek ahead today are the Psalms. You know which particular Psalms I'm talking about, even if you can't name them. You know because they are the Psalms that we sing this time of the year. We sing, "while fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains repeat the sounding joy...and heaven and nature sing." Those words are from Psalm 98.

Like most of the other psalms that are designated to be read in Advent and at Christmas, Psalms 98 and 96 speak of creation praising God... creation being invited to praise God. "Let the sea roar and all that fills it... Let the rivers clap their hands; let the mountains sing together for joy." "Let the field exult and everything in it! Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy..." These Psalms help us begin the story at the beginning. When God created the heavens and the earth and the morning stars sang together. How does a morning star sing? How does a tree or a mountain praise the Lord? Let me remind you how with a story.

Actually, it's Simon's story. A few months ago, 7-year-old Simon went missing. He had been having lunch with his family at Deep Creek Conservation Park in South Australia. And Simon just wandered off. He spent that night in the bush, in the wilderness, surviving near-freezing temperatures. Almost 24 hours after he disappeared — and after an extensive search by police — Simon was spotted by a rescue helicopter and lifted to safety. And then Simon told his story. "Dad, I'm okay," Simon explained. "I slept under a tree and there were kangaroos." Simon told his parents that while he was lost a kangaroo approached him. Simon was picking flowers, and the kangaroo just came right up to him and ate the flowers from him. Then, the kangaroo fell asleep next to him. Simon's father told news reporters, "I think God sent a kangaroo to keep him warm." "I think it was a miracle," his mother added. "When I smell his jacket, it's kangaroo – bush and kangaroo." A kangaroo kept Simon warm. At that moment that kangaroo was what God had created it to be and did what God had created it to do. And that is how each part of nature praises God. A kangaroo or a mountain or a star praises God by being what God created it to be and doing what God created it to do.

“God did not create us to be what we want to be or to do what we want to do. So it is with all that He created. The creation praises God by being and doing what He created it to be and do. And so a baby laughs as she chases down the hallway with her puppy. The squirrel chirps as it gathers acorns. The birds sing in the morning. The autumn leaves rustle upon the oak tree. The heart beats faster as a person goes out on a late afternoon run. All of these sights and sounds are praise to God’s ears and are beautiful to His eyes.” (Nielsen)

“Except when these sights and sounds are silenced or turned into something ugly. As when you see a deer lying lifeless on the side of the road. As when pollution dirties the sky, or when sewage and chemicals have contaminated water. As when a hurricane or tornado destroys lives and wildlife, homes and crops.” (Nielsen)

We once had a dog in our home named Snowball. She was part dachshund and part Jack Russell terrier. That dog could leap. But one day Snowball leaped and must have come down wrong, because her back was broken. One of the hardest things I’ve ever had to do was to watch that lively, leaping dog be silenced. In our own lives, the tears can run down our cheeks when the visit to the doctor brings news we do not want to hear. All of these are examples of when something or someone God created is no longer able to be or to do what God created them to be and do.

Romans chapter 8 puts this ugliness and silencing of God’s creation into a few words. “For the creation was subjected to futility... Now, we know that the whole creation has been groaning as if in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. And not only the creation but we ourselves groan inwardly...” So, how can the Psalms invite creation to praise the Lord? How can the Psalms call us to sing a new song, when we are groaning...when there is so much ugliness and silencing of God’s creation? (Nielsen)

Well, the groaning with which all of creation groans is not only the pains of being a fallen world. The groaning of creation is also a groaning as if in the pains of childbirth. The creation is yearning to be delivered like a woman in labor yearns for her baby’s delivery. Our groaning inwardly is our bodies yearning to be delivered like a woman in labor yearns for her baby’s delivery. All of creation yearns to be delivered.

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As Romans 8 puts it, all of creation yearns for “freedom from decay.” That is, freedom from dying... deliverance from death. We ourselves yearn for that deliverance, the day of the redemption of these bodies. “And that day of deliverance, that day of delivery, that day of the redemption of us and all creation, was heralded on the day stones sang out in praise to God.

“You remember that part of the story. Jesus was riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. His disciples had placed their cloaks on the donkey. Most of the crowd placed their cloaks on the road. Others cut branches from trees and spread them on the road. The crowd went before Jesus praising, “Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!” The Pharisees demanded that Jesus stop the procession and silence the praising. But Jesus said, “I tell you if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.” It sounded strange at the time.

“Not a week later the Pharisees got their wish. They silenced Jesus. No more words came out of His mouth when He died on the cross and His body was laid in a tomb. The crowds and the disciples were silenced. No more praise came from them as they hid in an upper room. Yes, the praises of all creation had been silenced.

But then, the stones cried out! They cried out on Easter morning!! Can you just hear the sounds of praise those stones made... stone against stone? Grinding... as the round stone in front of the tomb grinded against the stone of the tomb when the round stone was rolled away.” (Nielsen) As those stones were being and doing exactly what God wanted them to be and do on that day of Jesus’ resurrection. That day which heralded the coming day of redemption for our bodies, the day of redemption for all creation.

All of creation looks forward to that day. “Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the Lord, for He comes to judge the earth.” All of creation groans in yearning anticipation for the day Jesus will return and all of the ugliness, silence, and groaning will be replaced with the most joyful chorus of praise ever heard.

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There is a particular chorus of praise that gets sung a lot this time of year, though it's actually not so much about Christmas. It's more about the end of the story. Listen to the words again carefully:

**“Hallelujah, for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth, hallelujah! The kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever, hallelujah! King of kings, and Lord of Lords, and He shall reign forever and ever, hallelujah!”**

Now imagine birds joining in, adding their song to that of the sopranos. Cows are mooing the bass line. Fields of grain are waving in time to the music. The mountains have never stood so majestic. Deer run and leap without fear. A dog leaps so high into the arms of a woman that the Lord smiles. The fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains repeat the sounding joy of the crucified and risen Savior on the day He returns as Lord of Lords and King of kings, for He shall reign forever and forever!!

That's the sound of praise we look forward to, but it also the sound of praise we are already singing when we join the Lord's creation in being and doing what He created and redeemed us to be and do.

Amen!