

St. Peter Evangelical Lutheran Church + Modesto, California  
**The Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost**  
Festival of Favorite Hymns  
October 27, AD 2002

*Sermon by Pastor Jonathon Micheel*

**Psalm 33:1-4**

<sup>1</sup> *Sing joyfully to the LORD, you righteous; it is fitting for the upright to praise him.*

<sup>2</sup> *Praise the LORD with the harp; make music to him on the ten-stringed lyre.*

<sup>3</sup> *Sing to him a new song; play skillfully, and shout for joy.*

<sup>4</sup> *For the word of the LORD is right and true; he is faithful in all he does. (NIV)*

It's funny how things happen sometimes. Just last week, as I was driving here to church, a story came on the radio about singing. A few of you may know the name Ben Folds. He is a piano player who has his own rock band, Ben Folds Five. Well, several months ago, Ben Folds went on a concert tour, but without his band. Just he and his piano—that's all. And as he traveled around performing, he began to notice something: people wanted to sing along with him. Of course, people sing along at every rock concert, but this was different. Ben Folds found that with just a little guidance and direction, his audiences were singing along with him in two and three-part harmony! When asked about why this happened, Folds said that he thinks people have a deep desire to sing and make music. Once they overcome that initial awkwardness of opening their mouths and singing out, which is easier to do when other people are singing with you, they find that they love to sing.

We know that already, don't we? We know it's enjoyable to sing. Especially on Favorite Hymns Sunday, when the melodies and words are familiar, we love to sing out. It's very fitting, then, that we hear the words of God found in Psalm 33, which, incidentally, was already pre-selected for this day. In this inspired song (that's what the psalms really are—songs intended to be sung), this command is given:

**Sing joyfully to the LORD!**

Let's briefly look at the first part of this psalm, verse by verse.

**Standing righteous before him**

It begins: Sing joyfully to the LORD, you righteous; it is fitting for the upright to praise him.

Where do people sing together? It doesn't happen often anymore. For the last fifty years or so, people have more and more begun to think of music as something to buy and listen to, rather than to make themselves. Nevertheless, people do occasionally sing with each other. At some concerts they sing. At baseball games they sing "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" during the seventh inning stretch. At other athletic contests they may sing the national anthem. Birthday parties—there's another place where people dare to sing—"Happy Birthday," right? And of course, we sing here at church.

This psalm reminds us of something. It reminds us that when we sing to the LORD, we do so not just as people at a concert or a ballgame. We sing not just as people at a birthday party when the lights go down and the candles on the cake are lit. When we sing to God, we do so as people he has declared to be righteous.

This is something we take for granted perhaps, but it's a fact not to be overlooked. By all rights, God should hate to hear us sing. He is holy, surrounded by the flawless songs of the angels. Why would he want to hear things coming out of mouths that also spout gossip and curses and dirty jokes? We're sinners with unclean lips. Why would God listen to us?

Because of his grace. God loves sinful people, though we don't deserve it. And so God took it upon himself to remove our sins and make us pure and holy in his sight. He sent his only Son to live as our stand-in, never committing a single sin, never saying a bad word. He sent his only Son to die, condemned in our place for all the godless words we have ever said. As a result of what God's Son, Jesus, did, God looks at us sinners and says, "Your sins are all removed. I declare you to be righteous, not guilty of anything!"

This is good news not to be taken for granted. When we gather here to sing to the LORD, we do so as people touched by his love. We sing as people for whom Jesus wanted to shed his blood. We sing as people who are no longer under God's death sentence, though we should be. We sing as people standing before him declared righteous. And when we remember that, we will sing with true joy in our hearts.

### **Using all his gifts**

The next verse: Praise the LORD with the harp; make music to him on the ten-stringed lyre.

Who invented music? Did you ever think about that? Was it maybe someone named Giovanni Musicaldi, who, way back when, stumbled upon the idea? No. It was God! The LORD, who created this world in all its intricacy—he created music. He gave people the ability to sing and to make music. Way back in the Bible book of Genesis we hear about people beginning to craft musical instruments (Genesis 4:21). The book of Psalms, a collection of poetry inspired by God, is testimony to the fact that God loves music. Our spiritual forefather Martin Luther, himself an accomplished musician, recognized that music and all the arts were gifts from God.

What better way to use music, then, than to use it in the praise of God who gave it? The psalm writer encourages the use of musical instruments of his day: the harp and the ten-stringed lyre. Over the last three thousand years, many other instruments have been taken into the service of God. We often hear the organ and piano. Today we hear the tone chimes, too. And who could forget that most basic musical instrument of all, one that we all have—the voice? All of these instruments and more—flutes, winds, brass, strings, percussion—we use in the praise of God most appropriately.

Sing to the LORD, says the psalmist, as people who are righteous in his sight, using the gifts of music and the arts he has given you.

### **Striving to give him your best**

The psalm goes on: Sing to him a new song; play skillfully, and shout for joy.

There's an interesting word in that verse, one that you don't often see in the psalms. The word is "skillfully". Don't just sing, says the psalm writer, don't just play instruments—play skillfully.

The musicians and writers of psalms in Bible times tried to do that. "Sing a new song to him" says this particular poet (that's what psalms are: poems to be set to music and sung). Time was spent using the talents God gave to compose new songs for worship. Instruments were made. People practiced singing and playing. All in response to the LORD, the God of faithful love, who gave people the best he had, the God who promised even to send Someone to save people from death.

Just like the musicians of Bible times, we try to give our best to God, too. At school, on the athletic field, as workers, as spouses and parents—in all these venues we try to give our best to God. In music and worship as well, we try to give God the best we can.

We give our best to God because God has given his best to us. When the time came to save us, God didn't say, "What's the least expensive way I can do this?" Instead he said, "I am going to give my very best to the world, my one and only Son, so that whoever believes in him will have rich, full life now and glorious life forever."

Is it unreasonable, then, for our school children or our choir or our worship accompanists to practice, or to work on improving their skills? Is it extravagant to spend thousands of dollars on an organ or a digital keyboard? Or to have a worship space that is beautiful to the eye and the ear? Or to work on welcoming visitors to our worship? Or to present to them church grounds that are well-maintained? To expend some money and effort to give our best in worship?

Is it wasteful to spend time worshiping God—time that could be spent on other things? Is it a burden to exert some energy thinking about the words of the hymns that we sing? Or to focus our minds and open our lips to participate in the service? Is it a waste of time to sing these old songs, thinking again about the messages they send to us? Is it a waste of time to learn new songs in worship—to open ourselves to new favorites?

None of these things is wasteful, is it? God has spared no expense in blessing us. As we sing joyfully to the Lord, let's strive to give him our best. Let's concentrate our minds and hearts and voices to praise the God who gave his best to us.

### **Remembering the reason you sing**

Finally verse four: For the word of the LORD is right and true; he is faithful in all he does.

Here the psalmist reminds us of the reason he wants us to sing joyfully and play skillfully to the LORD—because the LORD makes promises to us and he keeps them.

We sing here in church because of God. That seems so simple, right? But what if I told you that it's possible to forget that simple fact?

Sometimes we sing more for us than for God. We come to church, hoping that some of our favorite hymns are up that day. We sing because we like to. It makes us feel good. And so if a song makes us feel good, we like it. If not, we don't. Am I right about this?

These words of God in Psalm 33 correct us. They remind us that we sing not just because it makes us feel good. There is a higher purpose. That purpose is to acknowledge God. God, the LORD, even though he didn't have to, decided to save us from his anger. He promised to send his one and only Son to be born of a woman as we were, to die as our substitute, to rise. This is what God promised for you and me. And this is what God did.

You see, when we sing to God, we're telling God, "Message received. We know what you promised, LORD, and we believe that you have done what you said. Your word is good. You promised to love us and save us through Jesus, and that's exactly what you did." And you know what? Each time we sing songs about God and to God, songs that remind us of who God is and what God has done and still does for us, God uses those songs to deepen our trust in him. He uses the Christ-centered songs we sing to enrich our relationship with him.

And there's another benefit to singing songs that remind us of who God is and what God does. God uses the messages of these hymns and songs to reach out to those who don't know him or don't yet believe in him. Martin Luther called music the "living voice of the good news." Music has a unique way of communicating the good news about Jesus, to us who have heard it before and to people who haven't.

When we sing, let's remember the reason we're singing. Sure, it's fun, especially on favorite hymns Sunday. But there's so much more. We sing songs and hymns and spiritual songs because of our God. His faithfulness gives us reason to sing. And hymns that tell of God and his grace—God uses those songs to create and deepen faith in him.

We could talk about music for a long time. The Bible is full of words encouraging and even commanding us to sing and to make music of all kinds. Today let's keep in mind the words of this psalm:

**Sing joyfully to the LORD:**

- standing righteous before him
- using all his gifts
- striving to give him your best
- remembering the reason you sing.

Amen.