

A Big God  
Psalm 100  
John 1:14-17

Westminster Presbyterian Church  
Pastor Doug Browne  
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Psalm 100

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.

Worship the Lord with gladness;  
come into his presence with singing.

Know that the Lord is God.

It is he that made us, and we are his;  
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

Enter his gates with thanksgiving,  
and his courts with praise.

Give thanks to him, bless his name.

For the Lord is good;

his steadfast love endures forever,  
and his faithfulness to all generations.

John 1:14-17

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, 'This was he of whom I said, "He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me."') From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

The Psalms were written as hymns to God. They are included in our Bible as the original hymnbook. They are used as the hymnbook to this day in synagogues and some Christian churches. We can see echoes of them in the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures and all through the New Testament, because the New Testament was written down by people who grew up hearing and singing these songs in worship every Sabbath.

Psalm One Hundred is a short psalm, only five verses, but it says a lot. Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth. We didn't make God; God made us. And everything else, too.

Worship God, give thanks to God, bless God's name. "For God is sheer beauty, all-generous in love, loyal always and ever."<sup>1</sup>

We are not called to worship God because God needs it. God does not have a supesize ego that needs to be stroked. We are called to worship God, to give ourselves fully to God, because we need it. The Westminster Catechism, in archaic language that tells you how old it is, tells us that "the chief end of man," our main purpose for existing, "is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever."<sup>2</sup>

When we praise God, when we speak explicitly about how great God is, we reinforce in our own minds what the proper relationship is, between God and us. I have studied theologians from across the past couple thousand years. From the time that the Bible was being written down until now. And one of the things they all agree on is that God is not merely bigger and more powerful and better than we imagine. God is bigger and more powerful and better than we human beings are capable of imagining.

And we are not. We are not God. We do not know everything. We do not have the power to do absolutely anything we desire.

But, for reasons beyond our comprehension, God loves us. God loved human beings all the way back when God created the first two, and God still loves us today. God loves us so much that the Word became flesh and lived among us, not in a comparatively nice and easy time to live like today, or even like, say, the Middle Ages, but the Roman Empire.

God knew what life was like in the Roman Empire: "nasty, poor, brutish, and short."<sup>3</sup> Fifty percent infant mortality. That means that half the children born alive, die by the age of five.

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 100:5, *The Message*.

<sup>2</sup> Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q. 1., in *The Book of Confessions*.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*.

It wouldn't be a few of you who had siblings who died as kids – it would be every one of us in this room. It wouldn't be a few of you who have buried children – it would be every parent in this room.

Of the people who survived to age ten, half would live to age fifty. Women could expect to have six or more children, on average, just to have some who might live long enough to take care of their mothers in their old age.<sup>4</sup> The leading cause of death for women was childbirth, dying in trying to accomplish that.

And all of that assumes that you did not experience either war or plague. The Roman legions supported the glory that was Rome by pillaging and destroying everything on the edges of the Empire. Their idea of an object lesson was to destroy a town so thoroughly that literally not one stone was sitting on top of another so that you could see where the town was. Tuberculosis, just to name one example, was endemic in nearly the entire Mediterranean region, and nobody even understood how it spread, much less how to treat it.

God was born into this world in animal space, and laid in a manger because there was no place for baby Jesus in places where people belonged.

Jesus grew up in that world I described, but worse. That description of the Roman Empire? That was for Rome, the beaming jewel of civilization. Jesus grew up in occupied Judea, a poor backwater of the Roman Empire where poverty was worse. Most people were doing what we would call subsistence farming. That is to say, they grew enough for their families to live on, but not much more. They had to pay the Temple taxes that paid for the priests and the upkeep on the Temple. Then the Roman occupiers took taxes on top of that, however much the tax collector thought he could get away with taking. In a good year, you could scrape by. In a bad year, you

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<sup>4</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demography\\_of\\_the\\_Roman\\_Empire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demography_of_the_Roman_Empire)

had to choose between eating your seed corn, or wondering if your family would starve before the crops came up. Life in town wasn't much easier: you might have had a bit more cash to spend, but your kids couldn't eat woodworking or pottery if there were no customers with money.

Jesus grew up in occupied Judea and lived his life there. He may have had siblings who died. We don't know. I'm sure that he had childhood playmates who did not make it to adulthood. He lived his life there, teaching the truth about God and humanity to anyone who would listen. He killed no one. He preached no bloody revolution. He preached a way of life that didn't have much use for marching armies and brutal military occupations.

Then the authorities killed him. They decided to kill him in a quick, arbitrary trial that probably lasted about ten minutes. Then they killed him in a brutal, barbaric way that lasted for hours.

That is the kind of world that God chose to come into as Jesus Christ, because God loves us human beings so much that God didn't want to wait for it to be easier.

God did that for us.

Things have gotten better. Oh, yes, things have gotten better. Many of the ways in which things have gotten better are directly because Jesus came to Earth, two thousand years ago. Even today, if you look at things long-term, things are getting better. These are signs that our big God is continuing to work in the world.

In 1649, the monarchy, which, you'll recall, God told the Hebrew people was a bad idea,<sup>5</sup> was temporarily ended in England, with the trial of Charles I. A hundred and a quarter years later, a country was created without a king, in a city called Philadelphia.

In that country, slavery was a fact of life. It was "justified" by selective Bible quotes, and the economy of part of the country depended on it. It took a bloody, horrific war, but less than a hundred years later, slavery was gone in the United States.

Worldwide, extreme poverty, or people living not much better than the subsistence farmers of Jesus' day, was cut in half between the years 2000 and 2010. The international community has a target of ending extreme poverty by 2030. They beat their last goal by five years.<sup>6</sup>

Life has continued to get better. It's not where it ought to be, but it's getting better. I could go on for an hour, listing examples, but I think we all have other things to do today. God is acting in the world, making things better, because God loves us.

A God who is big enough to come into the Roman Empire, not on the top of the heap but on the bottom, is big enough to love you. No matter who you are, or what you have done or left undone, God is big enough to love you.

God's work in the world is not done. Children still go to bed hungry, right here in Columbus, particularly in the summer. Infant mortality is not fifty percent anywhere in the United States, but it still different between the Hilltop and the affluent suburbs. That is a sign that the blessings that God has given America are still unevenly distributed. Different enough

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<sup>5</sup> 1 Samuel 8:10-22.

<sup>6</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Extreme\\_poverty](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Extreme_poverty)

that children born in different zip codes right here in Columbus have different chances of even surviving, much less succeeding.

God loves us, and God has work for us to do. Work that is worth doing. Loving our amazing big God and loving our neighbors, even when we don't find them so amazing. Because you know what? God loves them, too. Because that's the kind of god that God is.

God has told us through Jesus and through the prophet Amos what kind of worship God desires. "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream."<sup>7</sup> If we're doing that, then our worship, our expression of the relationship between God and us, is the way it ought to be.

No matter what our response to our neighbor is, if it is in any way petty, it is not of God. Because a God who came into the Roman Empire and was born, lived, died, and was resurrected for ungrateful human beings is anything but petty.

So, "Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth. Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing. Know that the Lord is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise.

Give thanks to him, bless his name.

For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations."

AMEN.

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<sup>7</sup> Amos 5:24.