

Make a Joyful Noise!  
Psalm 98:4-6  
December 17, 2023 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, UCC  
Rev. Dr. Cathryn Turrentine

A very strange thing happened this week. Because this is the third Sunday in Advent – Joy Sunday – I was looking for hymns on the theme of Joy. Right off the bat, “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee” – Beethoven’s Ode to Joy – was an obvious choice, and we will sing it at the end of the service. And I also found “This Is the Day,” which we sang earlier. I think of it as a camp song, because that is how I learned it. Then I came pretty much to a brick wall in searching for the third hymn for this service.

I looked and looked in our Chalice Hymnal and in the New Century Hymnal. I found basically three types of joy hymns in our Congregational musical tradition: Christmas carols (“Joy to the World”), Easter hymns (all those “Alleluias!”), and Communion hymns (“I Come with Joy to Meet my Lord”). There are lots of joyful hymns for those days. But it’s not quite Christmas yet. Easter is a whole gospel story into the future. Communion will come again in January. The hymns of joy for the ordinary days of our lives – not Christmas, not Easter, not Communion – were scarce on the ground. And I still needed another hymn.

There are some joy hymns from other faith and music traditions. In the end I found one in a beautiful minor key from the Mexican liturgical composer Carlos Rosas. It will be good to add this one to our repertoire.

I know that those of you who are musical are already thinking of other joy hymns I could have chosen. Trust me when I tell you there were copyright issues with some of those. Others perhaps I just missed. But my point is not about any individual hymn. It’s that this just wasn’t like other weeks, when I have many traditional Congregational hymns to choose from. Most of those hymns that we inherited from our Puritan forebears were stodgy, but they cover the theological territory pretty well. I can usually find several familiar hymns that suit my topic, and then supplement those with hymns from other traditions.

So, why not hymns of joy? Why do our traditional Congregational hymns seem to assign joy only to special days, to Christmas, Easter, and Communion, and not to yesterday, or today, or tomorrow? Other faith traditions have them. Evangelical Christians sing hymns of joy. Baptists sing joyful songs sometimes. The Hispanic Christian tradition is joyful. African American spirituals, which we sing frequently, are often joyful. Camp songs are joyful. So, why not our own legacy Congregational hymns?

You know the answer to that. Puritans were boring. They insisted on it. Especially on Sunday, of all days. Sit straight and still. Don’t swing your feet under the pews, even if they won’t reach the floor. Don’t poke your brother. Don’t chew gum in church. Don’t laugh. Listen to the preacher drone on and on for hours. Don’t run and play on the way home from church. Don’t have fun. Sunday is serious. It is for God alone. That’s what they believed, what they taught their children. The early American Christians who followed them were boring, too, right down into the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, when many of our hymns were written.

Here's the problem for us in all this: most people learn their own personal theology from the hymns they sing, especially the ones they sing as children, and not from the sermons they hear. This is why I work so hard to vary the types of hymns we sing each week. So, if joy is missing from our legacy hymns, the ones we sang as children, where is the joy in our understanding of God? Do we make room in our hearts for the joy of Christian life, not just on holidays but on ordinary days, too?

Our scripture today votes against the Puritans. This psalm votes for JOY.

“Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth;” it says, “break forth into joyous song and sing praises.” Use all sorts of musical instruments, too, the psalm tells us. This psalm votes unequivocally for joy in our relationship with God, for joy in our worship, for joy in our hymns, even – or especially – on the ordinary days. We don’t even have to sing in tune. The psalm says, “Make a joyful NOISE to the Lord.” Everyone can do that, even children, even those of us who don’t hear so well.

So, let us forget the Puritans we descend from and vote for JOY, too. Let us set aside any remnant of stodginess in our hearts and sing to the Lord a NEW song. Praising God is an act of pure joy. Praising God is not quiet. It’s noisy. It is exuberant. Feel praise rising up in you so you can’t help singing and moving around.

Give thanks to God with whatever instruments you have at hand. The psalm says with lyre and trumpets and horns. Use those, if you have them. But we have organ and piano and flute and clarinet. Praise God with those. Dig the tambourines and kazoos out of the closet and use them to praise God. Praise God with an old hymn and with a new hymn you have never sung before.

Make a racket praising God. Never mind the person in the next pew. Praise God anyway, and make a joyful noise about it.

Give praise to God because you are overwhelmed by God’s greatness, and you just can’t keep it inside you. Bring everything you have, everything that is in you. Bring your whole self to your praise of God.

Let the joy of praising God bring a smile to your face. Let praise burst out of you in joyful song and dance.

Let everything that breathes praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!

Amen