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Psalm 47

Joy

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Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Psalm 47 UM Hymnal

Clap your hands, all peoples! Shout to God with loud songs of joy. For the Lord, the Most High, is to be feared, a great Ruler over all the earth, who subdued peoples under us, and nations under our feet, who chose our heritage for us, the pride of Jacob whom God loves. God has gone up with a shout, the Lord with the sound of a trumpet. Sing praises to God, sing praises; sing praises to our Ruler, sing praises! For God is the Ruler of all the earth; sing praises with a psalm! God reigns over the nations; God sits on his holy throne. The princes of the peoples gather as the people of the God of Abraham. For the shields of the earth belong to God; who is highly exalted.

Since ancient times Psalm 47 has been used for worship. It is a psalm that teaches all people how we praise God and it is noisy. We praise God with clapping, shouting, singing, and a trumpet! We don’t know what led the people to praise God in this way in Psalm 47, but whatever happened it reminded Israel what God had done for them in the past. The people knew that God was in charge. We use Psalm 47 today because it says, “God has gone up with a shout,” which makes us think about when Jesus ascended into heaven. The God of Psalm 47 descended into human history and became flesh in Jesus. After finishing his saving work, Jesus has gone back to the throne from which he came. God has gone up with a shout and is master of the universe.

The church was just getting started when Jesus returned back to the mystery of the triune God. Right before the Ascension, Jesus tells his followers, “you will be my witnesses … to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Then Jesus is lifted up and a cloud takes him out of sight. Jesus had been with his disciples for forty days after Easter and then he ascended. Then it was left up to Jesus’ followers to continue what Jesus had begun to do and teach. And now it is left up to us. We are to tell the story of what we have seen and heard about God’s goodness. We are to tell the story of God who knows and loves all God’s people. We are to tell the story of God who brings justice to a broken world.

We are to continue the work as Jesus’ story becomes our story. To continue all that Jesus had begun to do and to teach as we speak of and live out the fullness of God’s presence in and for the world. So, we say things like, “I sing in the choir because it is my way to praise God.” Or, “I teach Sunday School because Jesus cared for children.” Or “I am going to make blessing bags for the hungry because Jesus said, “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat” (Matthew 25:35). Or “I am bringing food for the youth group because I believe in a God whose love embraces everyone.” Or “I am going to learn more about immigrant detention centers and see how I can get involved because Jesus’ mission was to let the oppressed go free, and this is one way to live that out.”

Teresa of Avila was a nun who lived in the 1500s. She wrote these words, “Christ has no body but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours, yours are the eyes with which Christ looks compassion on this world, yours are the feet with which Christ walks to do good, yours are the hands, with which Christ blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are the body. Christ has no body now but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours, yours are the eyes with which Christ looks compassion on this world. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.” We at Greenland Hills Church are called to be the living, active body of Christ.

Jesus is present in our world through us, through the body of Christ known as the church. The church doesn’t always get it right; the church is made up of human people after all. But God was with us in the past, God is with us now, and God will be with us in the future. Today we live as people who seek to follow Jesus knowing that God’s love is shaping us and we face the future with hope, trusting that one day we will see the glory of God shining from the face of Christ. Our hope is based on what God has done in the past and what we trust God will do in the future. If we believe God is the Most High, is awesome, and is a great ruler, then we can trust this God to be our refuge and strength whenever and wherever we gather and acknowledge God.

Almost a year ago, civil rights activist DeRay McKesson tweeted, “Some people live to see other people fail and that’s sad. I’ve noticed that people are just so negative. Find some joy folks.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Researcher and social worker Brene Brown responded, “That’s painfully true. I guess joy just takes more vulnerability than cruelty.”[[2]](#footnote-2) In February of this year Brene and DeRay had a conversation about the courage to show up at Riverside Church in New York.[[3]](#footnote-3) They talked about how joy is the most vulnerable emotion we experience, more than fear or shame. We are terrified of joy because when we let ourselves feel joy, we are so worried about being sucker punched by pain. So, when something joyful comes along, we dress rehearse tragedy so we are ready or we diminish the joy to protect ourselves from potential pain.

After the Ascension the followers of Jesus must have been terrified and yet, they shared the Good News of Jesus. We know they shared because we are worshipping God today in Dallas, Texas at Greenland Hills UMC. On this Mother’s Day, I wonder how many parents have stood over their sleeping child and watched them sleep? Made sure that they were breathing? I bet 95% of us. As you looked at that sleeping child you didn’t know that you could love someone that much. You didn’t know it was possible. And it didn’t take too long before your mind started worrying about something tragic happening to your child. The thing is all of us do that. You have this great moment and in the moment of that happiness, you start thinking about what horrible thing is going to happen now because you are in a joyful place. We are so afraid if we lean into it that it will get pulled out from under our feet and we will get sucker punched by pain. When joy happens we start dress rehearsing tragedy and waiting for disaster. It takes courage to hold on to hope because the fear is there, but we can’t let it overpower us. Our tomorrow can be better than our today.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Joy is not simply a happy reaction. Joy is a way of being. Joy is a choice to hold onto hope and keep faith in the face of evil and despair. Hope is defiant; hope is courageous. Joy is a shift in perspective, away from us and toward others. Toward compassion. Researchers say that there are three factors that seem to have the greatest influence on increasing our happiness. Our ability to reframe our situation more positively, our ability to experience gratitude, and our choice to be kind and generous. Our greatest joy is when we seek to do good for others. It’s how we are made. We are wired to be compassionate.

There is good in the world, and it starts right here with me, right here with us. I had this great t-shirt once that said, “If you can walk you can dance, if you can talk you can sing.” I don’t know the 100% truth of this saying, but I do know that in the dark times of our lives there will be singing. There will be singing about the dark times. My kids love to turn on the computer and look through old pictures. When I was a kid I looked through old photo albums, but they look at the pictures on the computer. Whenever there is a picture of them crying or upset, my kids never remember that moment. I remember that moment, but they don’t. A friend once said that Joy was Jesus over yourself. Joy. We choose the joy that God’s peace brings. To be a reservoir of joy, an oasis of peace, a pool of serenity that can ripple out from us to those around us.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The Bible doesn’t tell us Jesus’ expression as he ascended. It doesn’t say if he looked terrified or peaceful or joyful, but what gives God joy can give us joy. One of my favorite Psalm is Psalm 23. It has to be the King James version. It is in your hymnals on page 137 if you want to read it with me. “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.” That Psalm gives me hope. It gives me peace. It gives me joy.

Do you remember that Bobby McFerrin song from the 80s, “Don’t Worry Be Happy”? “In every life we have some trouble but when you worry you make it double. Don't worry, be happy. Don't worry, be happy now. Ooh, ooh ooh ooh oo-ooh ooh oo-ooh.” Bobby McFerrin has written a version of Psalm 23 that I want to invite you to listen to on this Ascension Day, on this Mother’s Day.[[6]](#footnote-6)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o9fzWq-d8jU>

This week Katherine Noll shared with me the words of author, Padraig O'Tuama. “Hope is a song sung when everything else says you shouldn't be singing.  Hope is joy.  Hope is a testimony that says 'even if it doesn't come true, I will live like it might'. Hope is what helps us survive.  Hope is little light.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Amen.

1. https://twitter.com/deray/status/767166411760345088 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://twitter.com/BreneBrown/status/767166919833100288 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. https://crooked.com/podcast/joy-the-gift/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Brene Brown shares about parents looking at their sleeping child. https://crooked.com/podcast/joy-the-gift/ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. # Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama. *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World.*

   [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o9fzWq-d8jU> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Padraig O'Tuama [↑](#footnote-ref-7)