

***“Shout for joy to God, all the earth; sing the glory of his name; give to him glorious praise! Say to God, “How awesome are your deeds! So great is your power that your enemies come cringing to you. All the earth worships you and sings praises to you; they sing praises to your name.”***

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

There are two Sundays in the Easter season that have always been special and dear to me. One of them is the Sunday we celebrated last week: Good Shepherd Sunday. The other is one you won't always see on liturgical calendars in our day and age, as it is a carry-over from an older time when we tended to give names to all the Sundays of the Easter season. These names were typically derived from the Latin Introids. The Introit is a selection of psalm verses that are read after the Confession and Absolution and which mark the actual beginning of the service. Having confessed our sins and receiving the assurance of God's gracious forgiveness, we are able to enter His presence, which is what the word *introit* means—to enter. These introits were used to set the stage and the theme of the day. The first Sunday after Easter was Quasi Modo Geniti, meaning, “as newborn babes”. Then there is Misericordia Domini: “the goodness or mercy of the Lord”. We follow that with Jubilate: “rejoice” and then Cantate - “O sing!” Finally there are Rogate, “pray”, and Exaudi, “listen” or “hear”.

Our approach to the themes of the Sundays of Easter may have changed, but I still love the idea of Cantate Sunday. When I was growing up, Cantate Sunday was filled with glorious music to the praise of God. The day itself is a call to sing the praises of our dear Saviour and redeemer. It is a reminder that we are still celebrating Easter, and the glorious hope and life that are ours through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. How can we keep from singing when we truly contemplate the wonder of Easter, and the grace of God made known because our dear Saviour took upon Himself our sin and shame and suffered our punishment through His death on the cross; and that He rises again from the dead, the Victor over sin, death and Satan,?

When the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle was asked what he thought of music, he replied, “*Jupiter does not sing, neither does he play the harp.*” He seems to infer that music is unbecoming to deity and therefore also unprofitable to humanity. The true God, on the other hand, before whom the morning stars sang together at the creation (Job 38:7) and around whose throne the cherubim and seraphim sing their glory songs (Isaiah 6:2-3), is a lover of music. I found 133 verses in Scripture that speak specifically of singing. Many more verses speak of music and song. Martin Luther said: “*Music is one of the fairest and most glorious gifts of God, to which Satan is a bitter enemy, for it removes from the heart the weight of sorrow and the fascination of evil thoughts. It is a kind and gentle sort of discipline; it refines the passions and improves the understanding. Those who love music are gentle and honest in their tempers. I always loved music and would not for a great matter be without the little skill I possess in the art.*” Luther saw music as an outstanding gift of God, second only to theology. Music stirs us to praise God, and music should be sung and played to the glory of God.

How can we keep from singing His praise? Of course, we know that in these COVID days, we are not to sing, out of concerns that this may be a means of transmitting the virus. I understand and acknowledge that we do submit to the governing authorities and thus refrain from our singing together in worship, but it is just so hard! Music is such a great part of our lives together as the people of God. It has always been the response of God's faithful people to His goodness. After their deliverance from Egypt, through the Red Sea, we are told: ***Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the Lord, saying, “I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.*** (Exodus 15:1 - ESV) After the Babylonian Captivity, at the dedication of the rebuilt wall around Jerusalem, the people ***sought the Levites in all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem to celebrate the dedication with gladness, with thanksgivings and with singing, with cymbals, harps, and lyres.*** (Nehemiah 12:27 - ESV) When Paul and Silas were in prison in Philippi for preaching the Gospel, we hear that ***about midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them,*** (Acts 16:25 - ESV) James tells us: ***Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise.*** (James 5:13 - ESV) And when John sees the glory of heaven in the Revelation made known to him, he notes: ***and they were singing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. No one could learn that song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth.*** (Revelation 14:3 - ESV)

Even if our song is muted because of COVID we still join today with all the saints of old, sharing in the words of the psalmist who declared: *“Shout for joy to God, all the earth; sing the glory of his name; give to him glorious praise! Say to God, “How awesome are your deeds! So great is your power that your enemies come cringing to you. All the earth worships you and sings praises to you; they sing praises to your name.”*

Music is an attempt to express emotions that are beyond speech. When we realize the reasons we have for singing, then we know that even music isn't capable of expressing the deep, abiding joy; the great and glorious hope; the all-encompassing peace that fills the hearts of those who know the grace and mercy of the Lord Jesus Christ through faith. Our reason for singing is found in God's great and glorious work for our salvation. In a Bible that Luther presented to the church organist in Halle in 1541, he wrote: *“A new miracle deserves a new song, thanksgiving, and preaching. The new miracle is that God through His Son has parted the real Red, Dead Sea and has redeemed us from the real Pharaoh, Satan. This is singing a new song, that is, the Holy Gospel, and thanking God for it. God help us to do so. Amen.”* (What Luther Says, p. 982)

We sing a new song, because of the wonderful blessings of the Lord, which are new every morning. We sing a new song because of the wonderful new life we have through Jesus Christ. God hasn't abandoned us to our sinfulness and the fate we rightly deserve. He hasn't forgotten us, even in the struggles of this world. But it is the struggles that we tend to see the most, isn't it? While there are days we can jump out of bed, and break into a rousing chorus of *Zip-a-Dee-Do-Dah*, it is more likely that we look at the whole reality of our lives and aren't sure that we have any real reason for songs of joy. When will this COVID nonsense be finished? When will my pain go away? When will my children learn to listen to me? When will I find a job? When will people stop being so cruel to one another? There seem to be so many things that squelch our joyful songs, and at the top of that list is the painful reality of our sin. Our hearts are not pure and holy as God demands. We are captive to our own sinfulness, shown by the things we do that hurt and deny our heavenly Father and His will for us. Our slavery to sin is shown with every loveless act against our neighbour. We are captives to sin, who must face the consequences of our sinfulness—and that doesn't make us feel like singing.

That is why the psalmist calls us to think of God's great deeds, and how they elicit praise in the hearts and lives of God's people. God has given us something to sing about, and how can we keep from singing, when we know the great love of our God for us; that love that is made known to us in His precious gift of His Son, Jesus Christ? We are drawn to the cross, and remember that Jesus loved us and gave His holy life as the payment for all our sinfulness. We are drawn right back to that empty tomb, and the victory over death and the grave that is ours in the resurrected Lord. Jesus gave His holy, sinless life for us, to make things right with God for us, so that we may look forward in joy to that time when God *will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.*” (Revelation 21:4 - ESV)

Sirius satellite radio has promoted the idea of “feel good” songs during the pandemic. They have taken listener requests for the songs that have made them feel better in these blah days. Or, as a “Buddy” once said, “the best way to spread Christmas cheer is singing loud for all to hear” Luther spoke of how music drives away the devil and how it can make us cheerful and move us to forget anger, pride and other vices. Yes, music can make us feel good. But if our song is tied only to how we feel, then we won't always feel like singing. The dark days of life will steal away our song.

On the other hand, when, like the psalmist, we recall the great things that God has done, especially in bringing us the forgiveness and life we have as His dear, baptized children how can we keep from singing? Then our song is not about us and about what makes us feel good or makes us feel like dancing. Now our song praises God. It expresses the faith, the hope and the life we have through Jesus Christ. We sing of His forgiving love. We sing of the hope and life that wait for us in heaven's glory. We sing, because even in the midst of life's problems and cares, we have a loving Lord who is with us to see us through. No, we can't keep from singing His praise—the praise of the Saviour who lived, died and rose for us, and who blesses us with His forgiveness and that glorious eternal life. Amen.