
The Pilgrim's Advent Song

Psalm 96¹⁷

Russ Kennedy

How can we raise our hearts this Advent season? We want to celebrate Christ in way that is worthy of the greatness of our God. We want to be congruent with the truths of the Word. What will call forth from us great faith in God's promises? How can we believe God so that all we do is enabled by God's grace and will show Him to be glorious to us?

Why is this a large concern for us?

- The DANGER OF INCREASING WORLDLINESS of God's people. Less and less is this season of the year about the incarnation of the Jesus Christ, the Son of God. I don't care much at all about the loss of that in the public sphere. In the era of the Bible's writing, it would have been unknown. But it is of great concern when the church's thinking about Advent is driven by the trusts and treasures of the world.
- The DIRECTION OF EMERGING DOCTRINAL ERROR in pulpits and Christian schools at all levels. The Advent season is a time for more sentimental claptrap than just about any other time. We are not thinking about the incarnation the same way the Bible is.
- The DECLINE IN GOD-CENTERED WORSHIPPING in the gatherings of the church. There is a rise in emotionally engaging singing, yes. But since so much of it isn't true it is not pleasing to God and therefore is not participating in worship.
- The DESIRE FOR PLEASING GOD in every area of life that we and many like-minded congregations have. This is great encouragement to me and to us. We are in a great company of pilgrims, of pastors and people, who are willing to think carefully about everything in order to savor and serve our God well.

I am more and more convinced that our familiarity with God and our inexperience with His majesty is undermining our understanding of Advent. It is debasing our walk with God and our worship of God at all levels. As an antidote to much of this, the Psalmist presents to us the gladness of trembling.

I aim to stir you to be know, apply and experience through personal engagement with the joy and gladness of trembling before an awesome God.

¹⁷ Unless otherwise designated, Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

At the Greatness of God**(v.1-6)**

There is a mighty call to God's people to worship. It is a worship that is rooted in who God is and what He has done. There is a gladness in trembling at the greatness of God.

- ¹ Oh sing to the LORD a new song;
sing to the LORD, all the earth!
- ² Sing to the LORD, bless his name;
tell of his salvation from day to day.
- ³ Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvelous works among all the peoples!
- ⁴ For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised;
he is to be feared above all gods.
- ⁵ For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols,
but the LORD made the heavens.
- ⁶ Splendor and majesty are before him;
strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.

Our Responsibilities as the People of God**(v.1-3)**

What an amazing thing we are called upon to do: to *sing* and to *say*.

The people of God are responsible TO PRAISE. What shape does this praise take? They are to sing. And they are to sing to the Lord. Think about what this means... We are *to sing to the Lord*. I know that we can and should sing to one another about God. But, the highest praise comes when we sing to God about Him. When you worship and when we sing, do we think of ourselves as singing to God? We are *to sing new songs*. They are new songs that praise the beauty of God, that describe His virtues and character and worth, that extol Him and this abase us, whose truths engage us powerfully and passionately with Him. We are *to bless God with our singing*. Brothers and sisters, my beloved, this is one of the most powerfully shaping truths for my own worship. I sing to God for the pleasure of God to bless the God who makes my praise possible and acceptable.

The people of God are responsible TO PROCLAIM. We are to proclaim the glory of God – the glory that saves and does wonderful things. We are to proclaim it in a formal sense. And we are to tell in an informal sense. And we are to proclaim it to all the people groups. We are to proclaim it as good news of salvation. We are to tell of all the works of God so that He will be marveled at everywhere by everyone.

The Reasons in the Majesty of God**(v.4-6)**

Why should we praise and proclaim?

Because GOD IS GREAT. He is to be praised in proportion to His greatness. And because He is a great God, then He is to be feared. We will praise and proclaim with reverence and respect only when we think of God as great. O may this be one of our great aims here at the Chapel. May all who come through these doors know by our exulting worship, our sweetness in fellowship, our joy and satisfaction in God, our sacrificial deeds

of serving love, our holiness and our living for the glory of God – may all know that our God is great.

Because GOD IS THE CREATOR. Since He is the creator and maker of all things, then He is the One and only true God. All others are pretenders – idols. The Hebrew here expresses the idea that idols are non-existent things. So over against the nothingness of idols is the infinite and inexhaustible reality of God.

Because GOD IS MAGNIFICENT. This word captures the words in this verse. God is surrounded by splendor and majesty, by strength and beauty. The incarnation in its weakness and humiliation are an amazingly wonderful thing for our salvation. *But we do not come to Jesus as He is in His incarnation.* We come to Jesus as resurrected and gloriously ascended to His majestic throne of grace.

At the Holiness of God

(v.7-10)

To the people of God there is a call to worship in praising and proclaiming. To the nations there is a call to acknowledging God in ascribing to Him that which is His due. There is a gladness in trembling at the holiness of God.

⁷ Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength!

⁸ Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;
bring an offering, and come into his courts!

⁹ Worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness;
tremble before him, all the earth!

¹⁰ Say among the nations, "The LORD reigns!
Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved;
he will judge the peoples with equity."

The Recognition by the Nations

(v.7-9)

All peoples are summoned to acknowledge and recognize the glory of God. They must ascribe to Him His true worth and value. That recognition is shaped by the contours of God's character outlined by His Name. His Names represent Him and the reputation He is to have.

This means that to fail to acknowledge God's glory is sin. That is what the New Testament tells us. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

This means that Jesus comes to demonstrate the glory of God, full of grace and truth. Though the glory was veiled for a season, yet it is now in life transforming display in the heavens and on earth in the Word.

This means that the aim of salvation is the recognition of the God's glory in all the people groups. This shapes what we think of as mission. The gospel we preach and proclaim is that of the saving grace of a glorious and glad God.

True recognition of God is expressed in three verbs here:

COMING TO GOD with offerings. The offerings here are sacrifices. Coming to God is always on the grounds of sacrifice. This is the great lesson in the covenant story of the Old Testament. First we come pleading the sacrifice of Christ. This is the only way to

come to God. And then we come presenting the sacrifice of ourselves. Paul framed Romans by this. For our sin and sanctification, we must come with the sacrifice of Christ (Ch. 1-11); for our service, we must come with the sacrifice of ourselves (Ch.12-16).

WORSHIPPING GOD in the beauty of His holiness. The essence of worship is to ascribe worth to God. We do this first by believing God and bowing to Him in such a way that we clothe all our lives with the beauty of His holiness. So the lost must recognize that they stand and are to bow before a HOLY GOD. This is what we must proclaim and what we must call for from repentant and believing people, all over the world. The holiness of God is to be seen as beauty. Now don't reverse this: do not use beauty as the standard for holiness. Holiness is the standard for beauty.

TREMBLING BEFORE GOD. Here where it ends: trembling before God. All the earth, all over the world, everyone is called to tremble before God. But too often Christians do not believe their God is One before whom we are to tremble. If this is not real in our experience then we will not make it a part of our proclamation and it will not be evident to others that we do quake before the awesomely majestic and terrifyingly beautiful holiness of God.

This is where we must change. From the Word of God, we must think, worship and obey a God who is full of splendor, majesty, stunning glory and beautiful holiness who is GREAT beyond imagination. We must magnify Him until our very sinful souls tremble before Him. Then we are truly ready to trust the sacrificial death of Jesus and offer ourselves as living sacrifices. Our trembling before God comes because of His greatness. Our tenderness with God comes because of His nearness. In these both together, let us pursue God with all our souls, minds and bodies until we know the gladness of trembling.

His Reign over the Nations

(v.10)

What has been the common message to the people groups all over the world under both the Old and New Covenants?

OUR GOD REIGNS. We are to declare our great Potentate before rebellious and riotous sinners. *God reigns in His person.* It is just the nature of the case that God, being who He is, is supreme and sovereign. *God reigns in His providence.* The earth is established and settled. When the sin of our world appears as chaos and disorder, God has it under His providential control. He is moving towards the ends He has designed. *God reigns in His purposes.* God's sovereign decree and design cannot be thwarted. His purposes no man can resist. *God reigns in His provisions.* He will give rain to just and the unjust. He will restrain the wickedness of man. He will give His salvation to those whom He has chosen. *God reigns in His people.* His true people are seen to be those who have bowed to the reign of God. That bowing is not grudging, but glad. *God reigns in perpetuity.* That is to say, God reigns forever. Of the increase of His government and reign there will be no end, commencing with the resurrection and session of Christ and culminating in the new heavens and new earth. Let all the earth know this: OUR GOD REIGNS!

OUR GOD JUDGES. Since God reigns, He also judges. He does not do so as a wicked despot whose decisions are not anchored in truth and law. No, He will judge the world in

righteousness. *God judges righteously*. He will do what is right in His judgment. There will be no appeal. There will be no overturning His decisions. *God judges with righteousness*. God's own righteousness is the standard. The glory of God's righteousness in Jesus Christ will be the basis on which all are judged. Let all the earth know this: OUR GOD JUDGES.

Is this what your evangelism sounds like? It is not our job to make God appealing so that people will make a decision. It is our joy to present the God before whom we tremble is a ruler, redeemer and righteous judge.

At the Coming of God

(v.11-13)

We have seen a progression so far. There is *command to believers* in the first stanza. There is a *call to sinners* in the second stanza. There is a *charge to creation* in the third stanza. So, there is a gladness in trembling at the coming of God.

¹¹ Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;
 let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
¹² let the field exult, and everything in it!
 Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy
¹³ before the LORD, for he comes,
 for he comes to judge the earth.
 He will judge the world in righteousness,
 and the peoples in his faithfulness.

The Rejoicing of the Creation

(v.11-12)

The Psalms as poetry are full of metaphors. This is one of those, if this then how much greater that. If there is a charge to the heavens, to earth, to the sea and field and trees, then how much more there is to us. That charge come to all creation. All that dwells in the heavens - the angels and cherubim and seraphim and all heavenly beings and powers. All that dwells in seas - the creatures who live there by God's design from bright sea bass to tiny creatures in the deeps to the great whales and their song. All that dwells in the fields - the insects small and butterflies bright and cattle dotting a thousand hills. All that dwells among the trees and even the trees themselves. All creation is to worship in trembling wonder and joyous praise to our great and holy and awesome and soon coming King.

When I hear texts like this, I imagine that all the combined voices of creatures throughout the universe raise their harmony in tune with morning stars singing together across the vastness of space. And the all over creation the waving trees and billowing grain and state-ly movement of planets and stars all dance in the court of the King. Far from our eyes creatures move in the depths of seas painted in gorgeous color for the pleasure of God. Beyond our ears, stars hum and angels sing for the pleasure of God.

So why sit we here unmoved and unfeeling when God takes pleasure in the praise of His people?

The Return of the Judge

(v.13)

But while we may think of this in the present, the charge is laid for the future. Let all this happen *when the King comes*.

THE KING HAS ALREADY COME. He did not come as a sovereign ruler, but as a suffering redeemer. He came as God in the flesh, as Jesus, the Messiah. God with us. We have behold His glory, as the glory of the only begotten of Father, full of grace and truth. So while the Psalms can only look forward to His coming, we can rejoice because He has already come.

THE KING WILL BE COMING. And there is a not yet as well. He came to judge sin, soon He will come to judge sinners. And at His coming He will be marveled at among all those whose sins He has judged on the cross. He will bring redemption He has purchased to His people and He will bring retribution He has promised to all the rest. Until that day, creation stands on tiptoes anxiously peering over the horizon of eternity longing for the day of the glorification of the children of God.

Reflect and Respond

Here is the gladness of trembling in this Advent Season.

Sing to the Lord His glorious greatness.

Ascribe to the Lord His glorious holiness.

Let everything living rejoice with exulting gladness!