

Music Sunday

December 12, 2021

Matt Matthews

from **Zephaniah 3**/Sing aloud . . . the LORD, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more.

There's a lot of singing in the scriptures of the Old and New Testament, lots of lute, and harp, and crashing symbols, and angels appearing and disappearing and flying round and around and singing, singing, singing. In Luke's gospel, four canticles are recorded in the first two chapters. That's a lot of singing.

And there's a lot to sing about.

When Mary hears she is to bear God's son into the world, she sings, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior."

Zechariah, father of Jesus' cousin John, bursts out in song: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them."

The angels sing about the birth to the lowly shepherds. And old Simeon, when he meets baby Jesus in the temple sings his gratitude: "*mine eyes have seen thy salvation!*"

Whenever God shows up, there is singing. The Old Testament Prophet Zephaniah invites a sung response from the people of Israel:

*Sing aloud . . . the LORD, is in your midst;
you shall fear disaster no more.*

*Do not fear . . .
do not let your hands grow weak.
The LORD, your God, is in your midst,*

*[God] will rejoice over you with gladness,
[God] will renew you in his love;
[God] will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival.*

*I will remove disaster from you, [says the LORD]
And I will save the lame
and gather the outcast,
and I will change their shame into praise.*

At that time, I will bring you home.

We've always listened to the words of scripture with great anticipation and hope. As we follow God around the pages of scripture and into the flesh-and-blood world, we stand with *fear and trembling*; and we, also, are filled with joy and awe. We hear God's promise. Our response is like that of the angels: to lift up songs of wonder and awe.

Alleluia, Lord most High!

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from Luke 2/*And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"*

The last known specimen of the Carolina Parakeet perished in captivity at the Cincinnati Zoo in 1918, and the species was declared extinct in 1939. Deforestation contributed to their extinction, and also, when populations were low, a possible chicken disease ravaged them, or, even a profusion of honey bees competed for habitat.

Another factor that exacerbated the bird's decline was their flocking behavior. When a Carolina Parakeet was in trouble, other Carolina Parakeets flocked to the vicinity of their endangered kin; when birds were downed by hunting, other birds came to their aid, thus enabling more to be killed.^[1]

Flocking, sometimes, is a human behavior. People of faith, with healing in their hands, gather where there is trouble. People of faith visit the sick and bereaved. People of faith congregate to sing God's praises. We are a gathering species.

In Luke's gospel the angels gather around the shepherds to share the Good News of Jesus' birth. But it's not just a few angels, it's a whole flock, a veritable multitude, a *heavenly host*.

Scriptures say the shepherds were sore afraid, even though an angel said there was no reason to be terrified. But there was. There *was* reason to be afraid. First, the sky was filled with singing angels. And if that were not enough, God had bent low to the earth, becoming incarnate in Jesus Christ. God didn't come as a warrior-king-messiah on a stallion, as might be expected, but as a baby in a manger.

This is a lot for shepherds to take in. Fear is one of many normal responses.

But, so are wonder and awe.

That's what Philadelphia pastor Phillips Brooks felt as he rode horseback across the Bethlehem plains in 1865. He saw modern day shepherds keeping their sheep that night, and he imagined those ancient shepherds centuries before doing the same when angels flocked round about them with good news about Jesus' birth.

And Mr. Brooks' prayer has become ours:

*O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray;
Cast out our sin and enter in be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us, Our Lord Emmanuel.*

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from Philippians 4/*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. 5Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.*

You'd think that because we are so blessed and because God has been so good, that we'd not need to be reminded to "rejoice." But Paul does that in his letter to the church at Philippi. God have given us a calling. God has ingrafted us into a wider family—the whole world. God has invited us into God's very own story. God has given us a savior. So, naturally, we rejoice.

Paul finds it necessary to remind the church to rejoice. He urges the church twice: *Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.*

There are lots of ways to rejoice, and tons of words to use. But a time-honored word that the faithful have used for millennia is the word, "Hallelujah." It means, literally, "praise God." Praise God for the evergreen, which reminds us of God's eternal, steady love. Praise God for the angels who pronounced Good News to Zechariah, Good News to Mary, Good News to shepherds, Good News to us. Praise God for the stars that remind us that God is our True North. Praise God for the manger, which reminds us how a mighty God chooses a humble path and makes friends with lowly people. Praise God for Jesus who, in his loving arms and wide reach, embraces the whole wide world.

O Morning Star, how fair and bright!
You shine with God's own truth and light.

Paul reminded the Philippians, and so reminds us: *Rejoice in the Lord always, Paul says. Again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

Alleluia.

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^[1] <https://johnjames.audubon.org/last-carolina-parakeet>