



## CHOIR ANNIVERSARY

### LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

**Sunday, August 9, 2009**

**Alfie Wines, Guest Lectionary Commentator**

Pastor, Grace United Methodist Church, Fort Worth, TX

**Lection - Psalm 100** (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 1) Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth. (v. 2) Worship the LORD with gladness; come into his presence with singing. (v. 3) Know that the LORD is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. (v. 4) Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name. (v. 5) For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.

#### **I. Description of the Liturgical Moment**

The Choir Anniversary is a much anticipated date on the annual calendar of many African American churches. How could it be otherwise? Choir members are excited because of the energy generated by weeks, or sometimes months, of preparation. Congregations are excited because they know that the choir will “sing like they’ve never sung before!”

Worship without music is an oxymoron in the African American church. In African American churches, improvisation in the music and participation by the congregation combine to create an experience of God's presence that can heal a broken heart, comfort a weary soul, and empower an exhausted spirit. The Choir Anniversary affirms this essential role of the music ministry in all its forms in the life of the African American church.

The links between worship and music run deep, from biblical times to the present. The ancient psalmists remind the community to praise God with song, shouts, musical instruments, raised hands, loud voices, dance, twirling, and in silence. Worship throughout the ages affirms the integral connection between God and humanity. The Choir Anniversary gives communal assent to this connection in the life of the believer and in the life of the Church.

## **II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Psalm 100**

### **Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter**

My love for the music of the Church has been part of my life since childhood. From age twelve until I finished high school, I was the pianist for the children's choir and for Vacation Bible School at the church I attended. After high school, I was determined never to play piano for the church again. Despite my efforts to hide my musical ability, before I knew it, I was working with church choirs again, first a youth choir, later adult choirs. The Choir Anniversary soon became one of my favorite times during the church year. I know that one of the main reasons that I am a minister of the Gospel today is because of the music that was planted deep in my spirit many years ago.

My years working in with church music ministries are an important foundation for my life as a pastor. They helped me understand that people enter the sanctuary looking for hope and encouragement in the midst of the joys and sorrows of everyday life. It is incumbent on the music ministry to address the full gamut of spiritual needs. The Choir Anniversary is a celebration of a job well done and encouragement to "keep on keeping on."

### **Part Two: Biblical Commentary**

One can almost hear the outbreak of jubilation described in this summons to praise in Psalm 100. This psalm calls the entire community to lift praises to God. This psalm is the last of a group of what are known as enthronement psalms (93, and 95-99). These psalms celebrate with an understanding that the LORD (Yahweh) is God.

When LORD is spelled in all caps it signifies the personal name of God (compared to the title Lord in which capital and small letters are used). LORD is the name God used during the story of "Moses and the Bush That Did Not Burn" in Exodus 3. God's response is a wordplay on Moses' reaction to God's call to deliver the Israelites from Egyptian bondage. Moses conveys his reluctance to answer God's call in Exodus 3:11

when he asks “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” God, who does not answer Moses’ question, responds by assuring Moses of his presence (Exodus 3:12). Moses, still not satisfied, asks God’s name (Exodus 3:13). God answers, “I Am Who I Am” (Exodus 3:14). The four references to LORD in Psalm 100 in verses 1, 2, 3, and 5 are a reference to God’s deliverance of and covenant with the Israelites through Moses.

The psalm begins with a notation (a superscription) that this is a Psalm of Thanksgiving. In ancient Israel, the thanks offering was a voluntary offering given as a sign of gratitude to God. Worshipers are admonished not just to praise God, but to offer praise in a spirit of thanksgiving.

The psalmist uses seven different verbs to call to the community to worship: make, serve, come, know, enter, give thanks, and bless. Although there are moments when we need to be still and quiet in the presence of the LORD, this is not one of them. Surely the psalmist was imagining what it might sound like when all the earth is praising the LORD at the same time. What a joyful sound, indeed, that would be! This is the kind of praise that so frightened an attacking army it began attacking itself instead of attacking Israel during the reign of King Jehoshaphat. (See 2 Chronicles 20.) On this occasion, the choir was in front of the army. What an awesome reminder of the power of praise. What an awesome reminder of the responsibility of the music ministry of the Church.

The sound of joy that arises from deep within cannot be stifled. This is the sound that conveys the wonder of simply being alive. Affirming this sense of joy, the psalmist admonishes those assembled to worship and serve God with gladness. (In Hebrew, “worship” and “serve” are the same verb.) This is the gladness that breaks forth fully aware of the realities of life. This is the gladness that enables one to come into God’s presence with a voice raised to sing praises to our Creator.

Just as there is time for silence before God, there is also time for lament, but this is not it. The praise of this psalm reminds us of a familiar spiritual which says, “If I don’t praise him the rock’s gonna cry out glory and honor, ain’t got time to die!”

This threefold call to praise (make, serve, come) is followed by an explanation of the reason behind this outburst of praise. The community is to give praise to God simply because God exists, simply because God is. With this admonition, the psalmist acknowledges that life begins with God. God created us. God is to be worshipped because God is the Creator who calls Israel into covenant. In other words, God is to be worshipped for who God is, not just for what God has done. God is a powerful God! The psalmist is glad to be counted among God’s people. The reference to sheep conveys an assurance that not only is God present, but God provides for His sheep, including the psalmist.

The psalmist does not stop with this explanatory interlude. The psalmist again gives a threefold summons to praise (enter, give thanks, bless). Worshipers are to enter with thanksgiving, praise and blessing for the LORD. This is praise of participation, there are

no spectators here. Everyone is to be engaged in the particulars of praising the LORD. The second reason for praise is given in verse 5. God is to be worshipped because of God's goodness, steadfast love, and faithfulness to all generations. In other words, God is to be worshipped not just for what God has done, but for what God will do for humanity in the future.

### **Celebration**

The psalmist declares in verse 3, "We are his people, and the sheep of his pasture." This assurance of being connected to and cared for by God encourages the kind of praise that can be heard during a Choir Anniversary and each day that we consider the goodness of God. Come on let us sing. Come on let us shout. Come on let us glorify and praise the LORD for He is worthy, worthy, worthy!

### **Descriptive Details**

The descriptive details in this passage include:

**Sounds:** This psalm causes the reader to imagine the sound of all the earth and all the people praising God—making a "joyful noise." Imagine a Choir Anniversary that utilizes every conceivable form of the music worship arts—including various combinations of singers (soloists, duets, trios, quartets, ensembles, choirs, mass choirs, etc.). Some songs would be accompanied; others would be sung *a capella*. All kinds of musical instruments (brass, woodwind, string, percussion) could be part of this praise scene; and

**Sights:** Sheep in pasture; saints entering the gates of the LORD; believers blessing the name of God; the LORD making humanity—imagine the hands of God.

### **III. Suggested Reading and Websites List Developed by Alfie Wines**

Abbington, James. [African American Church Music Series.](#)

GIA Music Publications. Online Location:

[http://www.giamusic.com/choral\\_music/african\\_american.cfm](http://www.giamusic.com/choral_music/african_american.cfm)

This is a choral music series in the tradition of the music of the African American church.

Abbington, James. [Let Mt. Zion Rejoice!: Music in the African American Church.](#)

Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2001.

This book addresses many practical aspects of music of the African American church, including the relationship between the pastor and the music staff.

[African American Heritage Hymnal.](#) Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, Inc., 2001.

This hymnal includes many traditional gospel songs.

[African American Worship: Faith Looking Forward](#) The Journal of the

Interdenominational Theological Center. Atlanta, GA: ITC Press, 2000.  
This journal contains essays on various topics related to African American sacred music.

Black Sacred Music—A Journal of Theomusicology. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989-1995.

This journal also contains essays on various topics related to Black sacred music.

Costen, Melva Wilson. African American Christian Worship. Updated Edition. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1993.

This book helps the reader understand the history and the contemporary context of African American worship.

Costen, Melva Wilson and Darius I. Swann. The Black Christian Worship Experience. Atlanta, GA: Interdenominational Theological Center, 1992.

This book provides insight into the total Black Worship experience.

Dargan, William T. Lining Out the Word:--Dr. Watts Hymn Singing in the Music of Black Americans. Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 2006.

This book provides insight into the tradition of the lined hymn.

Floyd, Samuel A. The Power of Black Music—Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1995.

This book traces the history of Black Music from its African roots to contemporary contexts.

Holmes, Barbara A. Joy Unspeakable—Contemplative Practices of the Black Church. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004.

This book debunks notions that worship in the Black Church is not contemplative.

Jones, Ferdinand and Arthur Jones. The Triumph of the Soul: Cultural and Psychological Aspects of African American Music. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001.

This book explores African American music from a cultural and psychological point of view.

Kirk-Duggan, Cheryl. Exorcizing Evil—A Womanist Perspective on the Spirituals. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997.

This book explores African American spirituals from the perspective of the Black woman.

Lovell, John. Black Song—The Forge and the Flame—The Story of How the Afro-American Spiritual was Hammered Out. New York, NY: Macmillan, 1972.

This book provides important insights into the making of the spiritual.

Mapson, J. Wendell Jr. The Ministry of Music in the Black Church. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1984.

This book explores the contemporary challenges facing music ministry in the Black Church.

McClain, William B. Come Sunday—The Liturgy of Zion—A Companion to Songs of Zion. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990.

This book provides liturgy that can be used in conjunction with many of the songs in Songs of Zion.

Cleveland, J. Jefferson, and Verolga Nix. Songs of Zion. Supplemental worship resources, 12. Nashville: Abingdon, 1981.

This songbook, published by the United Methodist Church, includes many traditional songs of the black church. Summary notes on history, style and performance notes are also included.

Soul Praise—Amazing Stories and Insights Behind the Great African-American Hymns and Negro Spirituals. Colorado Springs, CO: Honor Books, 2005.

This book tells the story behind many of the beloved songs of the African American Church.

Southern, Eileen. The Music of Black Americans—A History. New York, NY: Norton, 1997.

This book explores the music of black Americans from a historical viewpoint. Insights in this book can be helpful in understanding the music of the Black Church as well.

Southern, Eileen, ed. Readings in Black American Music. New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 1972.

This is a book of essays on Black American music.

This Far By Faith: American Black Worship and its African Roots. Washington, DC: National Office for Black Catholics, 1977.

Songs in this songbook can be used by any denomination.

Tutu, Desmond. The Worshipping Church in Africa. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993.

This discussion of worship in Africa helps connect African American worship to its African roots.

Walker, Wyatt Tee. Somebody's Calling My Name—Black Sacred Music and Social Change. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1979.

This book explores the musical genius of the black sacred music and its role in changing the social landscape of African Americans. It encourages the black Church to keep its rich musical heritage alive.

Warrick, Mancel, Joan R. Hillsman, and Anthony Manno. The Progress of Gospel Music—From Spirituals to Contemporary Gospel. New York, NY: Vantage Press, 1997.

This book looks at gospel music from a historical perspective.

Warren, Gwendolyn Sims. Ev'ry Time I Feel the Spirit—101 Best-Loved Psalms, Gospel, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs of the African-American Church. New York, NY: An Owl Book, Henry Holt and Company, 1997.

This book tells the story behind many songs of the African American church.

Ward, Andrew. Dark Midnight When I Rise—The Story of the Fisk Jubilee Singers—How Black Music Changed American and the World. New York, NY: Amistad, An Imprint of Harper Collins Publishers, 2000.

This book covers the history of the Fisk Jubilee Singers from 1851-1903. It provides important insight for understanding this musical genre and its impact on the world.

Watkins, Ralph C. The Gospel Remix—Reaching the Hip Hop Generation. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2007.

This book explores the role of gospel hip hop in reaching young people for Jesus Christ.

Zion Still Sings—For Every Generation. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007.

Published by the United Methodist Church, this is an update of Zion Sings. New songs and styles are included.

### **Notable Websites**

- The African American Lectionary. Online location: <http://www.TheAfricanAmericanLectionary.org> accessed 12 Feb. 2009  
In addition to this material, view other Year Two material and, particularly view the entire Year One calendar by visiting the archive link for each area.
- This website has the transcript and video for the PBS segment “Black church Music,” broadcast on April 13, 2007. Online location: <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week1033/cover.html> accessed 12 Feb. 2009
- Emmett G. Price III. Online location: <http://www.emmettprice.com/biography.html> accessed 12 Feb. 2009

This website hosted by Dr. Emmett Price, III lists a variety of information that would be of interest to persons who want to know more about black church music.

- Emmanuel Research Review. Online location:  
[http://www.egc.org/research/issue\\_17.htm](http://www.egc.org/research/issue_17.htm) accessed 12 Feb. 2009  
This website includes information regarding The Black Church Music Ministry Project (BCMMP) which is located in Boston, MA.