

## Sing Like God Is Listening!

A sermon based on Luke 2:8-20

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Where do you sound like a rock star? In the shower? In the car with your favorite song blaring on the radio? When you're sitting at your desk, doing some work, with the headphones covering your ears, and you're oblivious to what's going on around you?

Why those places? A song I enjoyed during college encouraged its listeners to "sing like you think no one's listening." It's easy to sing when you're by yourself, right? You can just loose, let it rip. Don't have to worry if you have the most beautiful voice or not...or whether you're singing is in tune or not...whether you're butchering the lyrics or not.

What about here in worship? Do you sound as good here? Are you as confident here? I could encourage you to think of it and sing like no one is listening, but I won't. Yeah, others are here, which can make it intimidating to sing out. But God's here, too. We get to sing here like God is listening because he is, and what he's hearing, I'll tell you, he's enjoying it quite thoroughly!

Now, I'm well aware how covering the topic of music in worship this morning is me opening Pandora's Box. This is probably the part of worship where people tend to be the most opinionated and where people tend to have their own specific and varied preferences.

So, let me start out by saying there's nothing wrong with that. Outside of music or songs which simply and blatantly convey or state heresy/false doctrine, any opinions and preferences are just that...your opinions...your preferences. Not right vs. wrong. So, I'm asking you ahead of time to keep an open mind as we better understand why we sing here and why we sing what we do here so this beautiful part of worship can become more meaningful for every one of us.

So, first off, why do we sing here? Why does music garner so much attention in our worship? Why does it have such a central role here?

First, it's our heritage. Yes, God's Word is our great heritage. It always will be. But music that conveys...that speaks that Word follows closely behind. In fact, ever since Luther's Reformation, the Lutheran Church has carried the label of being the "singing Church." It's part of our DNA. We sing.

Because not only is music in worship a part of our Lutheran heritage. Music in worship is simply another way for us to share God's Word. Look back at our 2<sup>nd</sup> Lesson from Colossians. What does it say? ***"Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts."*** Yeah, we can read God's Word, we can speak God's Word, but another amazing way that Word (and especially the message of Jesus) gets to dwell in us, teach us, admonish us (as in, lead us repentance)...another way is through our music and our songs. Just look through the notes on the sides of your worship folder. See examples of how our music throughout worship finds its basis in God's Word.

That music gives you an awesome chance to participate in worship. You know, you could just sit here for the hour of worship, I could talk at you, speak God's Word to you, spoon feed it all to you, and, Lord-willing, you would be spiritually edified. But how much more meaningful and fulfilling is it when you can actively participate, have a hand in proclaiming the good news.

This isn't a foreign or new concept. You know what believers in Scripture did? They sang! Like in our 1<sup>st</sup> Lesson, the Israelites had been saved from the hand of Pharaoh, not just released from slavery in Egypt, but also their very lives saved when God sent the waters of the Red Sea crashing down on the Egyptian armies...and how did they respond to God's victory? The very first thing? They sang! They sang to him...sang of his mighty acts and awesome power and amazing love. Often, throughout Scripture, when God won his people a victory, his people sang.

Or, in our verses here, I know they take us back to Christmas, but look at how the angels sang the good news of the birth of Jesus, the Messiah, the peace of the world. And then, the shepherds went and saw the baby, their Savior, and what was their response? They couldn't contain themselves. They glorified and praised God, and I find it hard to imagine them not joyfully singing as they ran through the streets. I mean, what do you do when you are just so overjoyed and so excited and so elated about something? Many people can't help but sing!

What has Jesus done for you? You know. And what gets to be your response here? You sing! Just listen to what Isaiah wrote, ***"In that day you will say: 'I will praise you, O Lord. Although you were angry with me, your anger has turned away and you have comforted me. Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. The Lord, the Lord, is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation.'" Sing to the Lord, for he has done glorious things...shout aloud and sing for joy.***"

And what better place to give glory to God, to praise him for his victories, to tell the good news of Jesus, our salvation, than here, in worship? And what better way to relay all of that to God, who's listening, than through music and song...through our different instruments and hymns...our different liturgies and choir pieces...through your voices?

A lot of reasons to thank God for the music he provides here. A lot of reasons for you to sing like God's listening. Do you? It's hard to say you're sinning if you choose not to participate in the singing here in worship. I would say you're missing out on a wonderful opportunity to express the thanks in your heart to your God with your voice, but I can't say it's sin. My only question to you, though, would be: what song is God (who we can see from Scripture encourages you to sing), what song is he hearing? And I don't just mean here in worship but in life as well. What's your attitude? What's your song?

Is it the chant of complaining? I'm sure you can think of all the times in life when you complain against God, either with your heart or your words, when you're not satisfied or when you're disappointed or when things aren't going how you would like them to.

It's easy to see a correlation to music in worship. I don't particularly care for that tune, that hymn, so I don't sing. This service is too boring or too difficult, so I don't sing. I don't find the music particularly uplifting, so I don't sing. Again, everyone has their preferences for music here, and it's easy to complain when the music isn't to your taste.

Or is your song, is it the tune of timidity? I know we try a variety of different music in worship here, trying to strike a balance between old and new. I'll take the blame for the new, maybe unusual things we try from time to time. Are you willing to possibly fail and fail loudly and boldly by struggling your way through a new or difficult song because you want to sing for Jesus? Or is it easier for you to just give up or take your volume down to a muted peep?

Is your song the serenade of stubbornness, where you know the music (or don't), you maybe like it (or don't), or you have the confidence to sing (or don't), and you just don't sing.

Is any of that the song you want to express to God? It would be like the angels, on the night of Jesus' birth, muttering their way through their "Glory to God in the highest." Don't know if the shepherds would have been

that excited to go see the place where the baby lay then. Or, if the shepherds, after meeting their Savior, had merely hoarded that joy inside of themselves...not the shouting aloud or singing for joy as God encourages in Isaiah.

Is what you give to God when it comes to music, to singing, is it your best? If God were listening, which he is, would he be satisfied...would he feel glorified by your song?

How can we do better? How can music here become more meaningful for us so that we're singing our best song to our Savior?

Above anything else, remember your Savior. He gives you reason to sing. The angels had the best news to share, so great they couldn't contain themselves as they burst into their own rendition of the "Gloria in Excelsis." The shepherds, so moved by meeting the Christ-child, their Savior and yours, wouldn't settle for anything less than shouting and singing that good news throughout the streets of Bethlehem.

Their same Savior gives you the reason to sing. The Israelites sang when God saved them from their enemies. Jesus has saved you from even greater, even stronger, even more dangerous enemies. He's soundly defeated your sin, death, and the devil...he's won for you forgiveness, peace, and eternal life in heaven through his life, death, and resurrection. He did that not because of what you've done for him, but purely because of his grace...because he loves you so much and wants nothing but the best for you.

And what simpler way can we show our appreciation, our elation for that greatest gift of salvation than through our voices, singing our very best to God here. So, again, how can we get there? How can the music here become more meaningful for you?

First, understand the why of it. Understand why we have the music we do in worship. Hopefully the additional notes on the side of your worship folder help you to better understand some of music's place in our worship. But even just look at the words, for the songs, for the hymns. Above all else, our music points to Jesus. And it always will.

Sometimes we can fall into this sort of mindset where music has to be all about the emotions, how does this song speak to me, how does this music make me feel, does it uplift me, etc. And so maybe you just want to hear and sing the classic hymns because that's what takes you back to your childhood or an important event in your life. Or you really have an affinity and preference for the power ballads of Christian contemporary music you hear on the radio these days because the instruments and the music really speak to your heart.

It's not bad to want for music and hymns here to connect to our emotions, but again, what's most important is that it points to Jesus. A fellow pastor once wrote, **"It's not the task of Christian artistic (musical) endeavor simply to affect the emotions or to make worshipers happy or sad. For the church, art (and music) remains a vessel that carries something, and that something is the gospel...the primary objective of music is to carry Christ to the heart."**

So, my encouragement to you is, before getting upset because of unfamiliarity or difficulty in some of our songs or because "we sing this hymn all the time," take some time to read through the words. Does that music carry Christ to the heart? Does it point you and others to Jesus?

Which is why, sometimes, we have some unfamiliar or "tough to sing" hymns in worship. Not because I get pleasure out of torturing you and watching you struggle through singing them. The reason I pick most of the hymns are because of their message. Before I even look at the tune, I look at the words, do they convey the message/theme of the service? Is it going to be all about Jesus?

So, when it comes to the contemporary Christian music you hear on the radio today, is all of that appropriate for worship, first, is it all about Jesus. I'll admit, I enjoy listening to K-Love, too, but here's a couple reasons why a lot of their music (not all of it, but a lot of it) doesn't necessarily translate that well to our worship. 1) Some of it has false teachings. Listen closely enough and you'll hear some, especially a lot of hints of decision theology (giving your heart to Jesus and accepting him as your Savior) and social gospel (life as a Christian is easy and will be without problems). 2) Some of it over-promises and under-delivers. The lyrics which basically sing, "I give my all to Christ" sound good, but can you, do you really? 3) A lot of it focuses on me and what I'm doing for God, "Lord, I lift your name on high" "Here I am to worship." Hopefully, that would make you uncomfortable. It's not about me; it's about Jesus.

And what about sticking to the same repertoire? Are you a firm believer we can't stray from Christian Worship when it comes to hymns or the music for our services? Where anything new or anything sounding different...you're immediately turned off. A good friend from high school once tried to tell me how Bach-style chorales (which are some of the good old classic, familiar hymns in our hymnal) were the only kind of music worthy for worship. Was she right?

A favorite hymn we're going to sing later, In Christ Alone, it's not WELS produced. The song we sang before the sermon? It was written by a WELS member in our PNW district. Did you like either of those? But it's new and unfamiliar! Do you see what getting stuck in the mindset of can't try anything new can do? It pushes aside some awesome stuff aside. It neglects and discourages the efforts people who are using their God-given gifts and talents to not just give him glory with their music but to share the awesome truths of his love with believers like you and me.

Or how about potentially using praise bands or guitars or even drums in worship...oh my! We couldn't ever do that. Listen to Psalm 150: ***"Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet, praise him with the harp and lyre, praise him with tambourine and dancing, praise him with the strings and flute, praise him with the clash of cymbals, praise him with resounding cymbals."***

I know, we are creatures of habit. People like to sing and hear what is familiar. A man named Paul Bunjes, for many years a Lutheran music teacher, composer, and observer, noted that the **"people don't know what they like, but they like what they know."** We have our preferences, but when it comes to music in worship, if it points to Jesus, if it gives glory to God, can we be more open to it? And not just be open to it, but be excited and willing to sing it. Sing like God is listening. Sing because God is listening

I get it, you may not be the kind of person who wakes up in the morning with a song on your lips. Your life may not be just one massive musical. You may feel your voice sounds horrible and you can't carry a tune if your life depended on it. That's ok. That doesn't mean you can't or shouldn't sing...especially here. This place is different. Here you hear about the incredible love of God. Here you get to respond with your voice. Here God hears your singing.

And he loves it. To him, it's as beautiful as the song of triumph the saints angel choirs are singing in heaven because it's music about him...it's music for him. We may not be a congregation full of professional singers by the world's standards. That's ok. You might think you sound good only when you're belting out songs in the shower or alone in the car. That's ok. There are no timid voices for God here. He gives you reason to sing. He's listening. So, let's gladly and eagerly "should aloud and sing for joy" because "he has become our salvation." Amen.