

Psalm Thirty-Three

Rejoice in the LORD, O you righteous.
Praise befits the upright.
Praise the LORD with the lyre;
make melody to him with the harp of ten strings.
Sing to him a new song;
play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts.

For the word of the LORD is upright,
and all his work is done in faithfulness.
He loves righteousness and justice;
the earth is full of the steadfast love of the LORD.
By the word of the LORD the heavens were made,
and all their host by the breath of his mouth.
He gathered the waters of the sea as in a bottle;
he put the deeps in storehouses.
Let all the earth fear the LORD;
let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him.
For he spoke, and it came to be;
he commanded, and it stood firm.

The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing;
he frustrates the plans of the peoples.
The counsel of the LORD stands forever,
the thoughts of his heart to all generations.
Happy is the nation whose God is the LORD,
the people whom he has chosen as his heritage.

The LORD looks down from heaven;
he sees all humankind.
From where he sits enthroned he watches
all the inhabitants of the earth—
he who fashions the hearts of them all,
and observes all their deeds.
A king is not saved by his great army;
a warrior is not delivered by his great strength.
The war horse is a vain hope for victory,
and by its great might it cannot save.

Truly the eye of the LORD is on those who fear him,
on those who hope in his steadfast love,
to deliver their soul from death,
and to keep them alive in famine.
Our soul waits for the LORD;
he is our help and shield.
Our heart is glad in him,
because we trust in his holy name.
Let your steadfast love, O LORD, be upon us,
even as we hope in you.

I remember a time when, as part of some church class I attended as a teenager, our pastor brought in our congregation's primary pianist - who also happened to be my aunt - as a kind of interview partner. The conversation was about music and singing within the life of the church.

At one point in the evening, I remember my pastor asking my aunt, "why do you think some of people in our church find the piano to be controversial?" That's right. I grew up in a church where leading congregational singing with the piano was considered controversial. Controversial enough, at least, to bring it up with the youth.

All the same, I loved them, and they were trying. I was even invited to play my guitar a few times before I moved out to go to university, and I am sure that my pastor - bless his heart and all his efforts - received no few phone calls about it each time that I did.

Because, for many people in that community, there was just one instrument that was suitable for worshiping God, and that was the organ. And there was just one kind of song that was suitable to go with such accompaniment, and that was the hymn.

That closed-catalogue, single-instrument logic would have been completely foreign to the world of the psalm-writers. In Psalm 33, we see three instruments of worship described. None of them, of course, happens to be a mid-20th century electric pipe organ. One is the harp, which we know David was skilled at and played often (v. 2) The others are ten and twelve-stringed variations of it (v. 3). Flip through the rest of the Psalms and will find even more listed. There is an entire orchestra's-worth, including everything from trumpets, cymbals, tambourines, and pipes - along with the repeated call for readers to join in with the music and sing "a new song" (v.3).

Devotees of the church organ and hymnbook made for easy targets, those days. As I've grown up, and grown in my own work as a pastor, I have come to recognize that this tendency towards a narrow vision of corporate worship can take many forms. There were people in that church, of course, who later came to insist that the piano was the most appropriate sanctuary fixture. For myself, in that time, it had to be songs written in the late 1990s or early 2000s played with guitar, bass and drums (I haven't checked recently, but I don't think any of those are mentioned in scripture either).

Every generation will have its own forms which it will find familiar and come to love. It is important that that be honored, and to be included in practice. All the same, the psalm-writers again and again invite their readers to praise God by as many *different* musical means as they can, and to continually create *new* words for worship to go with them.

The psalm-writers do this because they are more concerned with the question of why we worship than they are about how we worship. In Psalm 33, only two verses (vv. 2 & 3) speak to the question of how. The rest (vv. 4-22) is one long answer to the unspoken question of why we worship. We worship because God is faithful, righteous, just and loving (vv. 4-6). Because God is the creator, and the one who oversees history (vv. 7-14). Because God helps us and protects us (vv. 18-22).

According to the logic of the Psalms, our songs and means of accompaniment ought to be as many and as varied as the reasons why we worship God, and the reasons why we worship God are beyond count.

I'm sure that David preferred the harp that he played as a young man, and that he had his go-to choruses that he sang at important times in his life. All the same, we see here a call to a radically open and wide expression of worship, in response to a God whose greatness extends beyond measure. - NS