

I had planned to be on vacation this week to celebrate Mothers Day by taking the mother of my children to a Diamondbacks Game, but Pastor Diane's parents needed help and I told her that needed to become her priority. What better affirmation for this community, of our love of her and our support of Mothers on Mothers Day than that we encourage her in caring for her mother and father? That is what we desire of all adult daughters and sons. She is so well organized she had already written out our liturgy, chosen the hymns, even selected the title of the Sermon I am to preach. All of which makes me wonder, how each of us would do if we were following the order others had left for us? Not simply the calendar of meetings, but in what to say and do, and the topics we would consider? Is that not what the disciples struggled to do in these weeks after Jesus' resurrection?

Our Psalm does not just suggest, but rather commands and directs us, to "Sing a New Song to the Lord!" Yet, that's not exactly the focus Pastor Diane left as a sermon title for us, rather "Can we sing a new Song?" And I think as a starting point, her question was correct.

A week ago, on their way out of worship, someone said to me under their breath, "I think we are about done talking about COVID."

Then, on Tuesday, I had a call from the local newspaper, stating "There has been so much death and mourning, we want to write an article on what you are doing to help people with Grief, Loss and Mourning the Dead?"

The Book of Ecclesiastes describes "There is a time for every purpose under heaven, a Time to be Born and a time to Die, a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted, a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance..." So, are we done with Loss and Mourning, Is that time over or not?

The same newspaper reported that over 80% of us in the primary three Zip Codes of Valley Church have been fully vaccinated, the highest throughout Pima County! Among the leadership of our church there is growing concern that our people have been isolated in their homes alone for too long, and we need the stimulation of interaction. So, Are we ready to sing a new song? Do we weep or do we Sing?

There has been a prolonged anxiety for over a year, questioning "God, did you bring a pandemic upon us, WHY are you doing this?" or less accusatory, "God what do you want us to learn from this, what is the take-away?" At an earlier time in my life, when going through recurrent family struggle, I would often talk while walking the dog; or sometimes come to the Sanctuary and sit on the steps, talking to God, and occasionally screaming at God, "We went through this before, WHY, what more am I to learn or experience from mourning again?"

The new song of Psalm 98, is a radical shift! No longer blaming God. No longer confused. Instead, Praising God for being God! Thanking God for all God has done in Creation especially in redeeming us. Claiming our identity as being one among all God's creations. Psalm 98 calls the community of faith to the most subversive of political acts. Do not succumb to the PESSIMISM that all the world is sick and dying; instead, choose the most radical of all subversive acts: as a demonstration of faith choose Genuine Joy!

Sickness and scarcity have provoked pessimism, fear and insecurity. But the Psalmist of Scripture demands each person, every nation, all the ends of the earth to know the joy of being known and loved by God!

Many desire health, happiness, success, fame, wealth, pleasures, possessions, treasures, but these are not the JOY described here. C.S. Lewis in his autobiography "Surprised by Joy" describes Joy, as: "that which you cannot earn, buy, deserve or possess. Joy is a DIVINE Gift to receive, rather than a selfish Goal to pursue." The opposite of Joy is not sadness or sorrow or lamentation, but our own anxiety.

Jesus taught his followers, "Do not worry about your life... Who among you, by worrying, can add a single hour to his life?" Consider the joy of the birds in their morning songs, the happy exuberance of the cactus flowering in their spring time of glory. Jesus said, "If the Lord of the universe clothes creation with such extravagance, then surely we can rejoice in God's love, regardless of our circumstance."

What the Psalms point out, is that the Church in the 20th and now 21st Century has lost something, something vital we need to recapture in Worship of God. Whether you attend any different denomination, Catholic or Pentecostal, even Jewish and Muslim, the order of Worship will be roughly the same. The tunes and rhythms may differ, there may be rituals or praise, or recitation. We gather, we confess our sins, we are forgiven, we read the Scripture and have a brief sermon, we respond with our offerings and are blessed to go out into life. HOWEVER Ancient Judaism recognized and made a place for celebrations of JOY at LIVING!

One of the things I love about Green Valley, is that people on the street instinctively react the same way I always have. Throughout life, when passing a stranger, I smile and wave. In some places this is seen as a come one, some places as invasive. BUT here, strangers smile and wave back. It may simply be a nod, or a finger point, but an acknowledgement "I see you, you are known and LOVED by God!"

Two years ago, we came to Green Valley. I had had a miraculously, blessed career, like Midas everything touched turning to GOLD, followed by a few years of bitterness, rejection, hurt. So when I came to you, several commented that it seemed strange I was always smiling! In one or two of my early sermons there was exuberant JOY and HUMOR, to the extent that a few wrote letters, questioning: "Did you assume, we have had so much sadness, that we need you to come trying to provoke laughter?" Which was never my intent. I was simply filled with unbridled joy at being Called! So, I too took a step back, but now after another season of life has passed, I pray we are all now on the same page, that we can question putting our mourning, loss and anxiety behind us; to realize that GOD has done MARVELOUS things!

While God is Omnipotent, we were given a FREEDOM OF WILL, allowing that GOD dare not prevent us from plagues of our making, God only to Walk along beside us, but God can save and redeem a Remnant, and here we are ALIVE! What an insult it would be to God, that after saving us from this Plague upon all humanity, we did not respond with thanksgiving!?

In Worship as the Church we gather for Memorials at death. Even in our Weddings and Baptisms, we bind people up in unfamiliar clothing, requiring that they recite the words given them, doing the things done whether they understand or not. WHAT HAS BEEN MISSING IS THAT THE PSALMS OF Ancient Judaism told people, when you fall in LOVE: SING! When you make a life changing decision: CELEBRATE! When a Baby is born: BLOW THE TRUMPETS! When you survive calamity: LIVE LIFE SINGING A NEW SONG!

If you were a Cactus celebrating the love of God, what would you do? If you were a river, how would you as one of God's creations thank God? When I had a wedding of South Sudanese, the women did something called "Ululating", I asked what that was and they looked at me puzzled "Do you not know the Sound of Angels Glorifying God?"

Among the Hymn Selections Pastor Diane instructed that we sing, was what to me is a New Song, I understand some of you know, a JOYFUL Exuberant song! There is nothing here Typical of our Worship of God. I especially enjoy the narrative at the bottom of the page in our hymnals, that the text fits with a Second Exodus, instead of Egyptian Slavery, for a people to sing who were released from Exile, to return to their homeland and ALL Creation to Sing!

Having heard these reflections could we stand together and AFFIRM What we believe, not as a recitation mumbled, but with JOY as a People of God who ACTIVELY BELIEVE!