

“With a Voice of Singing”

“Sing for joy, you heavens . . . shout aloud, you earth beneath.

Burst into song, you mountains, for the Lord has redeemed his people!” (Isaiah 44:23)

Responsive Reading “Sing to the Lord”¹

Many years ago someone sent me a greeting card with Proverbs 15:15 on the front. The translation was one that I’ve not been able to find again, but neither have I been able to forget it, either, and it has become one of my favorite verses in all of God’s Word: *“For the joyful heart, it is festival always.”* Would you say that with me? *“For the joyful heart, it is festival always.”*

Festivals of just about any sort tend to feature singing, and we do a lot of singing during the Festival of Advent. By this time just a week from now, we’ll have moved on from CHRISTmas and will be turning our thoughts toward a New Year; but what I hope to do this morning is to provide a frame that may make “the perpetual festival of a joyful heart” something that each of us is able to experience every day of the year—on sunny days and on stormy days, whether it’s CHRISTmas season or not.

I’m going to attempt to do this by an unusual method for a sermon. I’m going to tell you three stories about the song of a joyful heart. Each of these stories is deeply true, but they’re true in different ways. And I didn’t write any of them.

The first story has to do with Creation. The second story has to do with Redemption. And the third story has to do with the New Creation. For me, at least, these stories have become symbols that mark the beginning, middle, and end of the universe as we know it. They mark the trajectory of the Grand Plan of God. And they provide the framework within which we can experience joyful, singing hearts every day of our lives—not just at CHRISTmas.

The three stories are “The Song of Creation,” “The Singer,” and “Eternity’s Song.” We begin with “The Song of Creation”²

The Song of Creation: “In the darkness something was happening at last. A voice had begun to sing. It was very far away and Digory found it hard to decide from what direction it was coming. Sometimes it seemed to come from all directions at once. Sometimes he almost thought it was coming out of the earth beneath them. Its lower notes were deep enough to be the voice of the earth itself. There were no words. There was hardly even a tune. But it was, beyond comparison, the most beautiful noise he had ever heard. It was so beautiful he could hardly bear it. . . .

“Then two wonders happened at the same moment. One was that the voice was suddenly joined by other voices; more voices than you could possibly count. They were in harmony with it, but far higher up the scale: cold, tingling, silvery voices. The second wonder was that the blackness overhead, all at once, was blazing with stars. They didn’t come out gently one by one, as they do on a summer evening. One moment there had been nothing but darkness; next moment a thousand, thousand points of light leaped out—single stars, constellations, and planets, brighter and bigger than in our world. There were no clouds. The new stars and the new voices began at exactly the same time. If you had seen and heard it, as Digory did,

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on December 20, 2015.

² C.S. Lewis, *The Magician’s Nephew*, Book 6 in *The Chronicles of Narnia* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), pp. 98-105.

you would have felt quite certain that it was the stars themselves who were singing, and that it was the First Voice, the deep one, which had made them appear and made them sing. . . .³

“The Voice on the earth was now louder and more triumphant; but the voices in the sky, after singing loudly with it for a time, began to get fainter. And now something else was happening.

“Far away, and down near the horizon, the sky began to turn grey. . . . The eastern sky changed from white to pink and from pink to gold. The Voice rose and rose, till all the air was shaking with it. And just as it swelled to the mightiest and most glorious sound it had yet produced, the sun arose.

“Digory had never seen such a sun. . . . You could imagine that it laughed for joy as it came up.⁴ And as its beams shot across the land the travelers could see for the first time what sort of place they were in. It was a valley through which a broad, swift river wound its way, flowing eastward toward the sun. . . . The earth was of many colors: they were fresh, hot, and vivid. They made you feel excited; until you saw the Singer himself, and then you forgot everything else. It was a [huge] Lion. . . .”

This singing Lion was Aslan, the form that Jesus takes in the world of C. S. Lewis’s *Narnia*, and this is Lewis’s description of the Creation of Narnia. And if we imagine the creation Lewis describes as our own—which was really his intent—this same Singer later chose to live among us in the form of a man, a human person like ourselves. Aslan’s name in this story is “the Singer”:

The Singer⁵: “When [the Singer] awoke, the song was there. Its melody beckoned and begged him to sing it. It hung upon the wind and settled in the meadows where he walked. He knew its lovely words and could have sung it all, but he feared to sing a song whose harmony was far too perfect for human ear to understand. And still at midnight it stirred him to awareness, and with its haunting melody it drew him with a curious mystery to stand before an open window. . . .

“Sing the Song!” the heavens seemed to cry. “We never could have been without the melody that you alone can sing. . . . You, too, are higher than the earth! You sang the higher music once, before the oceans ever crashed their craggy coasts.”

Full well he knew that few would ever see him as a singer of so grand a piece. He knew what they would say to him: “You are no singer! And even if you are you should sing the songs we know.”

And well he knew the penalty of the law. A dreamer could be ostracized in hate for singing songs the world had never heard. Such songs had sent a thousand singers to their death already.

And the song which dogged his aching steps and begged him pleadingly to sing it was completely unfamiliar. Only the stars and mountains knew it. But they were old. And man

³ “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth . . . as the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy?” (Job 38:4, 7).

⁴ *The sun lives in the heavens where God placed it. It bursts forth like a radiant bridegroom after his wedding. It rejoices like a great athlete eager to run the race* (Psalm 19:4-5).

⁵ Calvin Miller, *The Singer* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1975).

was new, and chained to simple, useless rhymes. . . . But daily now it played upon his heart and swept his soul . . . “Sing . . . sing . . . SING!” . . .⁶

“Sing the Hillside Song!” [the people] cried. There were so many of them. He wasn’t even sure he could be heard above the din of all their voices. He walked among them and looked them over. In his mind he knew that the Father-Spirit wanted each of them to learn his song.

Someone in the sprawling crowd stood and handed him a lyre. “Sing for us please Singer—the Hillside Song!” “Yes, yes,” they called, “the Hillside Song.” . . .

He looked down at the lyre and held it close. He turned each thumbscrew till the string knew how to sound, then he began Then they broke into his song and cried out with one voice, “Tell us, Singer, have you any hope for us? Can we be saved?”

“You may if you will sing Earthmaker’s Song!”

“Is there another way to cheat the Canyon of the [Cursed]?”

“None but the Song!”⁷

Years passed, and a single voice rose from another sea of faces, now in the city square: “We have found the long-awaited Troubadour. He knows the Ancient Star-Song!”

“Yes! Yes!” cried the throng. “He knows the Ancient Star-Song—He is the Troubadour, Son of Earthmaker!”

The Grand Musician turned to the Singer. “Is it true? Are you the Troubadour? Can you sing the Ancient Star-Song?”

“I am he. I know the song.”

“Then sing it now,” agreed the Keepers of the Ancient Ways.

The Singer took his lyre and strummed the strings. The chords fell outward over all the throng. The audience grew still. He sang the very words he first had sung before his mother.

Above him towered the wall and high upon the bulwark he saw the framework of a strange machine. It was the great machine on which false singers met their death. He knew what it meant to sing a new song. And then his finger swept the strings and he began the final verse⁸

The dying went slowly. The great timbers were weathered by the grimness of their task. . . . The Singer seemed small among the heavy beams of wood. . . . The Singer felt . . . the multiplied pain of a hundred [billion] men all dying at one time. . . .

“*Now*, who will sing the Father-Spirit’s Song?” World-Hater taunted the dying man.

The Singer seemed to rally in his suffering. From somewhere far beyond himself he drew a final surge of strength and sang the final verse again: “And now the great reduction has begun: Earthmaker and his Troubadour are one.” And then his lips fell silent.

⁶ Miller, pp. 6-9.

⁷ Miller, pp. 70-71.

⁸ Miller, p. 98.

The Father-Spirit wept. The stones bled. The Shrine of Older Life collapsed in rubble. And Terra shuddered in her awful crime⁹

In the morning, the wreckage of the great machine lay in splintered beams beneath the wall. . . . Each workman feared that he might be the one to come upon the mangled body of the Singer who now lay buried in the last remains of the machine. . . . But where the Singer should have been there lay only a key—a great key forged from a metal never mined on earth.

When the workman stooped to pick it up he found that it was broken. It was clear that whatever door it might have fit would never see its use again. That nameless door would remain forever locked or open. For a moment the workman wondered which. “Open,” he thought. “Yes, definitely open”¹⁰

Like autumn leaves triumph swirled upward into sky. The song came on forever. And distant quasars hurrying in space marveled that the dull and joyless world had finally come of age.

Thus Terra joined the universe who knew the song so long before . . . and those who know the Ancient Star-Song still watch with singing for the sign of footprints in the galaxies through which the little planet rides in routine cycles of despair. But Joy seldom sleeps for long. And someday in a lonely moment humankind will shake an unfamiliar hand and find it wounded.”¹¹

Finally, **Eternity’s Song**. While the first two stories were parables, this story is from an eyewitness: “I have no recollection of the impact or anything that happened afterward. In one powerful, overwhelming second, I died. . . . Simultaneous with my last recollection of seeing the bridge and the rain, a light enveloped me, with a brilliance beyond earthly comprehension or description. Only that.”¹²

“In my next moment of awareness, I was standing in heaven. Joy pulsed through me as I looked around, and at that moment I became aware of a large crowd of people. They stood in front of a brilliant, ornate gate. . . . They rushed toward me, and every person was smiling, shouting, and praising God. . . . It was as if they had all gathered just outside heaven’s gate, waiting for me. . . .

“I had never felt such powerful embraces or feasted my eyes on such beauty. Heaven’s light and texture defy earthly eyes or explanation. Warm, radiant light engulfed me. As I looked around, I could hardly grasp the vivid, dazzling colors. Every hue and tone surpassed anything I had ever seen. . . . The best way I can explain it is to say that I felt as if I were in another dimension. Never, even in my happiest moments, had I ever felt so fully alive. . . .

“I felt loved—more loved than ever before in my life. . . . Everything I saw glowed with intense brightness. . . . As I stared ahead, everything seemed to grow taller—like a gentle hill that kept going upward and never stopped. . . . The powerful light I had encountered when I met my friends and loved ones paled into darkness as the radiance and iridescence in front of me increased. . . . The light engulfed me, and I had the sense that I was being ushered into the presence of God. . . . *Then I heard the music.*

⁹ Miller, pp. 122-126.

¹⁰ Miller, pp. 135-136.

¹¹ Miller, p. 151.

¹² Don Piper, with Cecil Murphey, *90 Minutes in Heaven: A True Story of Death & Life* (Grand Rapids: Revell, 2004), pp. 20-32.

“My most vivid memory of heaven is what I heard. . . . Myriads of sounds so filled my mind and heart that it’s difficult to explain them. The most amazing one, however, was the angels’ wings. I didn’t see them, but the sound was a beautiful, holy melody with a cadence that seemed never to stop. The swishing resounded as if it was a form of never-ending praise. . . .

“A second sound remains, even today, the single, most vivid memory I have of my entire heavenly experience. I call it music, but it differed from anything I had ever heard or ever expect to hear on earth. The melodies of praise filled the atmosphere. . . . but the most remarkable thing to me was that hundreds of songs were being sung at the same time—all of them worshipping God. . . .

If we played three CDs of praise at the same time, we’d have a cacophony of noise that would drive us crazy. This was totally different. . . . As strange as it may seem, I could clearly distinguish each song. . . . I couldn’t calculate the number of songs—perhaps thousands—offered up simultaneously, and yet there was no chaos, because I had the capacity to hear each one and discern the lyrics and melody. . . . Even now, back on earth, sometimes I still hear faint echoes of that music. . . .”

¹¹ “Then I looked again,” John wrote, in our final scene, “and I heard the voices of thousands and millions of angels around the throne and of the living beings and the elders. ¹² And they sang in a mighty chorus: **‘Worthy is the Lamb who was slaughtered—to receive power and riches and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and blessing.’** ¹³ And then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea. They sang: **‘Blessing and honor and glory and power belong to the one sitting on the throne and to the Lamb forever and ever.’** ¹⁴ And the four living beings said, “Amen!” And the twenty-four elders fell down and worshiped” (Revelation 5:11-14).

And now we add our voices to this Eternal Song. You don’t even need a bucket to carry the tune.

Worthy of Worship

Terry York (1988)

Worthy of worship, worthy of praise, worthy of honor and glory;
Worthy of all the glad songs we can sing, worthy of all of the offerings we bring.

*You are worthy, Father, Creator.
You are worthy, Savior, Sustainer.
You are worthy, worthy and wonderful;
Worthy of worship and praise.*

Worthy of rev’rence, worthy of fear, worthy of love and devotion;
Worthy of bowing and bending of knees, worthy of all this and added to these . . .

*You are worthy, Father, Creator.
You are worthy, Savior, Sustainer.
You are worthy, worthy and wonderful;
Worthy of worship and praise.*

Almighty Father, Master and Lord, King of all kings and Redeemer,
Wonderful Counselor, Comforter, Friend, Savior and Source of our life without end.

*You are worthy, Father, Creator.
You are worthy, Savior, Sustainer.
You are worthy, worthy and wonderful;
Worthy of worship and praise.*