

Sing to the Lord

Exodus 15:19-21

Ephesians 1:3-14

October 10, 2010

Many of you, older than me, may remember memorizing the Westminster Shorter Catechism. For those my age and younger, you may wonder what I am talking about. What the heck is the Westminster Catechism. And if there is a shorter, does that mean there is a long version too? Well yes. There is a shorter and a longer. But that doesn't matter right now. A catechism is a series of questions that students would memorize and then would memorize the answers. It was thought that such a process could instill in a young person a knowledge of the faith, and give them a head start on understanding theology. Thankfully, such memorization is no longer in vogue in education circles. But I want to lift up to you a fascinating part of the catechism, that has made its way into even my vocabulary.

The first question asked in the Westminster Shorter Catechism is "What is the chief end of man?" Today we might ask, "What is the chief end of human beings?" Meaning, what is the purpose of human life? Why do humans exist? What are we set here on the earth to do? And the answer may surprise you, if you don't remember the answer already. The chief end of humans is "to glorify God and enjoy God forever." What? To glorify God and enjoy God forever. Not to accumulate all the wealth one can accumulate. Not to raise a family or repopulate the earth. Not to invent a new renewable energy source. Not to make our parents happy. According to the Westminster catechism, our purpose on earth is to glorify God. The goal of our lives is to live in praise of God, in thanksgiving for what God has given us. To live as an act of thanks and praise to a loving and gracious God.

The Exodus narrative, that epic tale of the deliverance of the Israelites from bondage into freedom, provides us with a glimpse of a group of people who were able to praise God with reckless abandon. I don't remember much from my seminary training, some 30 years ago, but I remember well the discussion about the end of the Israelites crossing of the Red Sea. When Pharaoh's chariots and soldiers were drowned in that sea, the Israelites safely on the other side on dry land, breathed a sigh of relief and the first thing they did was to dance, play music and sing praises to God. This little snippet of scripture is thought to be one of the oldest extant writings of the

Old Testament. Once deposited on dry land, Miriam and all the women took tambourines, singing and dancing, “Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.” Singing, dancing, playing instruments...enjoying God, glorifying God. Note that they did not pitch tents immediately, nor did they scurry along quickly to find food and water. They stopped to praise God.

We might wonder these days why in the world our purpose on earth is to glorify God. With as many problems that face the human race, why would we expend such energy on something so seemingly useless? Wouldn't our efforts to procure peace in the Middle East be more important? Or our efforts to eliminate world hunger? Or putting our energy into housing the homeless, or any number of other good works? Not to denigrate any of these activities, they remain important indeed. But, the fact remains, our chief purpose, number one purpose, primary purpose, prime directive as Christians is to Glorify God and enjoy God forever.

There are at least two reasons why the praise of God is important. First of all, worship of the Almighty takes us outside of ourselves. When we acknowledge that God is God, we cannot help to see just who is in charge. And it isn't us. Worship, praise to God directs our love away from ourselves and points us outwardly. Without this praise, we would surely become entangled in our own good works, prideful of our own accomplishments, and unaware that our every move comes from the one who loves us, created us and embraces us.

Additionally, worship, praise, gives strong testimony in an increasingly secular society to the reality of God in the world. To a world that is at best indifferent to the reality of God and at worst denies God outright, our worship continues to point to another order than one that assumes we have found all the answers in ourselves and that there is no other path than the path we as humans can create and identify.¹

Secondly, the letter to the Ephesians reminds us that we “have been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things...so that we...might live for the praise of his glory” (1:11-12). Patrick Miller, emeritus professor of Old Testament at Princeton remarks, “the praise of God is ...utterly useless-and that is the reason we do it.”² He continues his argument by proposing that both the Westminster Shorter Catechism and the Biblical word set aside all utilitarian goals, all efforts to identify moral

purpose or worthwhile functions and claim that our chief purpose in life is praise and joy in God. In the face of persistent claims and accepted patterns both in our secular life and in our life as a church, patterns that would have us live useful lives, accomplish things, set up endless programs that somehow help us justify our existence, worship, praise, glorifying God sets aside all human accomplishment as folly.³

Throughout the history of Christianity, there has been an argument about the right place of music in the worship of the Heavenly One. In our austere Scottish past, music was banned from the worship service as too humanly aggrandizing. But we have been liberated from such a view thankfully, and now know that music is essential for our full expression of thanks to God. How would we worship without singing with reckless abandon? How would we praise God without organ, piano, flute, tambourine, drums, guitars or voice? How would we as the Psalms constantly enjoin us, Sing to the Lord a new song without the benefit of music?

Oh we have in this particular congregation the usual grumbling between the traditional and contemporary styles of worship and singing. But, we are in both worship services praising God. We are worshipping the holy one, we are glorifying God and are thus achieving our purpose on earth.

Music is at the heart of our praise. Without it what would we be?

Let the music ring! Let us sing new songs and old! Let us glorify God and enjoy God forever! Let us fly in the face of all that is useful and with abandon express our Joy at being the children of God, giving thanks for all that God has done for us. Thanks be to God.

¹ Patrick Miller, *Our Life in Praise of God, A Sermon*, in Call to Worship: Liturgy, Music, Preaching and the Arts, Vol. 43.4, Office of Theology and Worship: Presbyterian Church(USA), p. 33.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.