

All Saints Sunday, Psalm, Year C

SINGING A NEW SONG

Psalm 149

All Saints Sunday

Analysis by Steven E. Albertin

1Praise the LORD!

Sing to the LORD a new song,
his praise in the assembly of the faithful.

2Let Israel be glad in its Maker;
let the children of Zion rejoice in their King.

3Let them praise his name with dancing,
making melody to him with tambourine and lyre.

4For the LORD takes pleasure in his people;
he adorns the humble with victory.

5Let the faithful exult in glory;
let them sing for joy on their couches.

6Let the high praises of God be in their throats
and two-edged swords in their hands,

7to execute vengeance on the nations
and punishment on the peoples,

8to bind their kings with fetters
and their nobles with chains of iron,

9to execute on them the judgment decreed.

This is glory for all his faithful ones.

Praise the LORD!

DIAGNOSIS: Out of Tune

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Hitting Some Bad Notes

A party psalm for All Saints! What better way to celebrate this

great festival of the church than with this. We gather to sing songs. Let's dance in the aisles. Strike up the band and get out the tambourines and harps. Don't just whimper a song but praise God from the depths of your throat. This day provides the opportunity for the church to belt it out in praise of a God who rescues the faithful even from the chains of death.

So far so good . . . through the first part of verse 6. However, then the psalm starts to go south. The beautiful music and the delightful party are distorted by some unwanted dissonance. Some bad notes disrupt the gaiety and only seem to grow in volume. Out come the swords wreaking vengeance. Some of the party goers are punished as they are bound in chains of iron. The party-poopers believe that their purging is a holy cause. God has been on their side. Divine judgment has been executed. Hallelujah!

How can we sing a psalm that is both an expressions of praise and vengeance, joy and getting even, harps and iron chains? It is embarrassing and awkward to sing a song like this when the church is gathered to celebrate the triumph of God's love and the fate of the saints.

However, this psalm reflects the truth about the church and the communion of saints. It is still a marred and broken masterpiece. It is a treasure still in earthen vessels. There is always chaff mixed in with the wheat. The saints remain paradoxically sinners.

All too often, this troubling reality manifests itself as saints seek payback for the wrongs they have suffered. We want vengeance for those who have wronged us. We look for swords to slash those who have hurt us. We pass judgment on those who do not meet our definition of saintliness.

The church is its own worst enemy, behaving badly, becoming mired in conflict and crippling its witness. Such dissonance

gives the world one more reason to reject the church's claims. "Those Christians are no saints. They behave no better than anyone else." The bad notes ruin what had started as a great party song.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Time for an Audition

When the band is off key and the dancers stumble, we are tempted to clean house, or at least conduct another audition. We will be the judge and jury when it comes to deciding who is in and who is out. Who else can we count on? We even wonder about God because God has permitted such amateur musicians to be a part of the band that is supposed to create great music truly worthy of God.

We have all experienced such auditions. We work hard to shine, trying to hit every notes and sound good. We may even have conducted such auditions on behalf of a church that wants to clean up its act. We have our own list competencies that band members must be able to perform. Especially for this festival of All Saints, we want this band to play well. We like to cite the really good saints. You know them, the ones we need to emulate, the stars of scripture and the heroes of church history, the ones who hardly ever hit a bad note: Saints Peter, Paul, Mary, Francis, Luther and Miss Schmidt, the kindly Sunday School teacher who for decades faithfully taught the children of the congregation about Jesus.

With disgust and disappointment we look at the communion of saints around us and see too many who are not really good Christians. We hear too many bad notes and see too many missteps. Since God does not seem to be doing anything about it, we are all too willing to step in on his behalf and conduct the auditions ourselves. Pull out the two-edged sword. Ready the chains and links of iron. Even saints like Peter, Paul, Mary,

Francis, Luther . . . and Miss Schmidt are off key. We really don't want to hear their flat notes or see their mistakes. It's embarrassing. Remember the public furor several years ago when the journals of Mother Theresa became public and revealed that she was a doubt-filled and sometimes-grouchy old lady. Many in the church were embarrassed and tried to explain it away, as if such saints ought never to hit a bad note.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Falling Flat

The problem is that fewer and fewer are able to pass the audition. Even the great saints in the history of the church are off key and play more flat notes than we ever wanted to admit. No wonder we usually want to give the great saints of the church a "pass" when it comes to the audition. We want them to be the good examples we are trying to emulate. When they play some flat notes or sing off key, we begin to question the whole process. If they can't pass the audition, who are we to think that we can? We begin to realize that the audition that we thought was such a good idea . . . is not. We all live lives littered with too many bad notes. Just when we thought we were pretty good, playing with perfect pitch, we see how flat we actually are. We want to plug our ears and run.

Do we really want to celebrate All Saints Day and sing Psalm 149? What if we all fail the audition and fall flat? What if those brandishing their swords, dishing out vengeance and punishment to those who have come up short, putting them in chains and hauling them off to jail, have actually been sent by God? If we have not already fallen flat, we soon will. This is not a pretty picture.

PROGNOSIS: In Tune

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): God's New Song

We are in a pickle as long as we think that it is up to us to

make good music. After falling and singing flat, the world needs a new song. There is one—and God sings it! God graciously intervenes beginning with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the promise to David and the prophets always making good on God's commitment to Israel. Israel at its best believed that. That is the new song of which Psalm 149 speaks. This new song with its tuneful melody proclaims that God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, repeatedly rescuing Israel from its folly.

That new song breaks out in Jesus. He immerses himself in this world of bad notes and dissonant songs. He puts himself between us and the two-edged sword. He is punished for the sake of all those who have sung out of tune. He is bound in chains and hauled off to jail . . . just like all of those who have failed their audition. He joins the fate of all of those who have fallen flat . . . because God will not let the same old broken melody bury the world in a cemetery of sin and death. This is the new song . . . of grace and mercy.

Jesus' resurrection confirms that the cross was no bad song or tragic defeat. It was the climactic act of love by the God who is determined to never give up on his people. It is the grand chorus of God's love for the world.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Hearing the New Song

When God's people hear this new song, they rejoice that they are free from the accusations and burdens of their old failures. At this party, the saints are not those who can flawlessly carry a tune or sing an aria. The saints are those who have received this glorious good news and are swept off their feet by it. There is no need to clean house and demand auditions. Trusting this promise, they realize that their place in the choir has not been guaranteed by their performance but by their receiving God's mercy. They realize that saints are not perfect but the

imperfect who have been forgiven. This gracious melody is like no other.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Singing the New Song

Therefore, the joyful words of Psalm 149 are theirs. They sing to the Lord a new song full throated with harp and tambourine while dancing with joy no longer praising God for what they have done but for what God has done. They are not surprised that God's people are still flawed. They do not need to resort to two-edge swords, cleaning house, punishing those who do not measure up, binding them in chains and hauling them off to jail. They are not surprised that short of eternity God's saints are still sinners. That realism prevents undue surprise and draining disappointment. Instead, it gives them the courage to continue singing the new song even while others have given up. It gives them the patience to not only sing the new song but treat those who are out of tune with love and mercy, giving them the same opportunity to hear the new song . . . and join the celebration.