

An imperative to praise (Psalm 98)

The psalmist is bossy: “Sing to the Lord a new song.”

by [Katherine Willis Pershey](#)

May 3, 2024

To receive these posts by email each Monday, [sign up](#).

For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.

Last fall, while chatting on the phone with my best friend, I mentioned that the ginkgo trees were at the height of their brief, golden glory. She urged me to take a picture to send to her, and I ended up taking several, marveling that a dinky little camera phone could capture even a trace of the brilliance of yellow leaves against a bright blue sky. This tree was praising God the only way it knows how. It can't make a joyful noise unto the Lord, but it sure can make a splendid yellow unto the Lord.

I love the imperative issued by Psalm 98. The psalmist is bossy: *Sing to the Lord a new song*. He or she doesn't stop with human worshippers equipped with voices and instruments: the psalm goes on to address the sea, the floods, the hills.

It is delightfully imaginative. All of creation is commanded to join in the song of worship. I can't help but recall when Jesus makes his triumphant entry into Jerusalem and encounters Pharisees who are offended that the people are worshiping him. They tell Jesus to forbid his followers from praising him. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus retorts that if these people were to be silent, even the stones would cry out. Maybe we don't always obey the commandment to sing praises to God, but the ginkgo trees and songbirds never fail to comply. The roaring seas and singing hills never fail to join in.

When I preach this psalm, I challenge my parishioners to abide by its commands. I dare them to sing the Doxology in the shower. I press them to behold the world with fresh eyes and notice how all creation joins in the song. I pray they will remember the marvelous things God has done and give thanks.

But I also remember the people for whom Psalm 98 might sound like a clanging cymbal, a loud cacophony that does not resonate with the state of their soul. I invite them to flip a few pages in either direction until they find a psalm of lamentation. Psalms do, after all, cover nearly every single human emotion we might ever know, including some that seem too impolite and gruesome to be included in sacred scripture.

The steadfast love and faithfulness of God are not going anywhere, not even when we find ourselves drowning in floods of sorrow rather than clapping our hands in joy. Not even when we find ourselves tiptoeing along a sidewalk covered in foul-smelling ginkgo fruit, less than a week after the same tree was crowned in beauty. Whether we praise or we lament, the steadfast love and faithfulness of the Lord remain.