

# Break Forth Into Joyous Song

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth;  
break forth into joyous song and sing praises.



## Prayer of Illumination

Lord God,  
you've declared that your kingdom is among us.  
Open our eyes to see it,  
our ears to hear it,  
our hearts to hold it,  
our hands to serve it.  
This we pray in Jesus' name.  
Amen.

## Background

Psalm 98 is known as the *Cantate Domino*, which in Latin means "O sing to the Lord" the first line of the Psalm. Psalm 98 is an invitation to praise. But not just any kind of praise. We're talking boisterous, thunderous, and multi-layered praise.

The first round of praise echoes from Israel. The second round echoes from every single human being. And the third round culminates in a cosmic crescendo of joyous praise of both animate and inanimate. The Christmas carol "*Joy to the World*" sums up the Psalm well:

"Fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains repeat the sounding joy!"

We've got reason to sing because of God's loving-kindness. The Hebrew word for this is *hesed* which means covenantal kindness and loyalty. God hasn't forgotten us—God is faithful, remembering his promises for us. Because of this we can sing a new song, even if circumstances are not the best.

When Psalm 98 was written, the Jewish people were far from Jerusalem. They were stuck in their Babylonian Captivity. But the psalmist reminded them and us: just because something is postponed, stalled, suspended, or delayed, does not mean that God has forgotten. God is poised to bring about a New Exodus for his people.

- The **First Exodus** was deliverance from Egypt and Pharaoh.
- The **Second Exodus** was when God eventually brought Israel back from Babylon to the Promised Land.
- The **Third Exodus** is found in the New Testament and can be understood as God delivering us from captivity to sin and death through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ giving us abundant life.

But there is a **Fourth Exodus** we still wait for. The Fourth Exodus is any time of waiting for deliverance in our lives on earth, whether it be individually, as a church, or collectively as a society. Where we are waiting, waiting for the exile of the pandemic to end, waiting for the exile of physical hardship in our lives to end, waiting to return to Church, waiting for a breakthrough. Even in times of waiting, when we're still in exile and that exodus has not yet come, we can still sing a new song, even in the midst of the same old same old. Why? Because God is present and alive and active in our lives and in this world. God is able to enter into the difficulties of our lives in a miraculous, divine, and supernatural way single-handedly. As the psalmist says, "God has done marvelous things." God usually does marvelous things when things are miserable in our lives. It's a biblical principle. The marvelous comes out of the miserable. This is not only good news to be shared, but good news to be shouted, good news to be sung!

Hallelujah! Can I get an Amen?

*Let's hear now the Word of the Lord from:*

**Scripture: Psalm 98:1-9 (NRSV)**

O sing to the LORD a new song,  
for he has done marvelous things.  
His right hand and his holy arm  
have gotten him victory.  
The LORD has made known his victory;  
he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations.  
He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness  
to the house of Israel.  
All the ends of the earth have seen  
the victory of our God.

Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth;  
break forth into joyous song and sing praises.  
Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre,

with the lyre and the sound of melody.  
With trumpets and the sound of the horn  
make a joyful noise before the King, the LORD.

Let the sea roar, and all that fills it;  
the world and those who live in it.  
Let the floods clap their hands;  
let the hills sing together for joy  
at the presence of the LORD, for he is coming  
to judge the earth.  
He will judge the world with righteousness,  
and the peoples with equity.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,  
but the Word of God endures forever.*

## **SERMON — Break Forth Into Joyous Song**

Music marks special times and occasions in our lives, the ups and the downs, the highs and the lows, beginnings and endings. Anything meaningful we do, rest assured music has been close by. The love of music and the recognition of its power is one of the defining characteristics of what it means to be a human being.

Anthropologist Daniel Levitin claims in his book *"The World in Six Songs,"* that there are six kinds of songs human beings make:

First, Friendship Songs that create communal bonds through patriotic songs and sporting event songs.

*O Say can you see, by the dawn's early light ...*

Second, Joy Songs that help us hit the dance floor or celebrate holidays or milestones.

*Happy Birthday to you ...*

Third, Comfort Songs are the blues, laments, lullabies, and ... elevator music. These songs soothe us when we're stressed, agitated, or downcast.

*Rock a bye baby on the tree top ...*

Fourth, Knowledge Songs that communicate important information for learning.

*ABCDEFGG ...*

Fifth, Love Songs, that sing of our longing for intimacy, like:

*And I eeee I will always love you ...*

And finally Religious Songs that convey ritual, faith, God, and a deep yearning for meaning.

*Amazing Grace ...*

The **new song** mentioned in *Psalm 98* is a combination of two of these six songs: A **joy song** and a **religious song**.

New songs are flexible and can be sung in a variety of ways and in all kinds of situations. Our “new song” is kind of like a *cantus firmus*. The Latin phrase *cantus firmus* in music means a fixed song. It’s a pre-existing melody that forms the foundation for a whole range of compositional possibilities. There’s a freedom within the foundation of the *cantus firmus* to add a dash of local spices or a pinch of regional phrasings, all the while still being the same song. At Immanuel, we bake our home-grown taste into our new song God has given us. The *cantus firmus*—the “fixed song” is our new song. It’s embedded in our daily living as believers. It’s the soundtrack of our lives. And this new song that’s ever fresh sings of the old, old story that never grows old.

Our church and world are facing so many challenges right now. We can rattle of the list pretty easily:

- Not being able to gather in person for worship.
- The ravages of a crisis virus—with over 400,000 deaths.
- The sickness or loss of loved ones.
- And the pandemic’s toll on our mental health.

The list goes on.

I like how author and professor Leonard Sweet describes this last year or so as:

*A sudden appearance of black swans, 800 lb. gorillas, runaway trains, wild cards, and a house of cards, all bowled into one.*

What does the psalmist tell us to do in times like these? *Cantate Domino: Sing unto the Lord a new song*. The *Cantate Domino* is our *cantus firmus*, our fixed song.

You see, new situations require new songs. A new song can be a song of joy, and other times our new song can have more minor chords reflecting our sorrow and melancholy. But whatever’s going on in our lives, Psalm 98 is sure to lift up our souls. It’s like a spiritual ladder, helping us to climb out of all the madness and muck going on in our world, helping us rise above it all, by singing above it all. The gift of God’s new song lifts our head, helping us to **look up** and **sing up**—belting out our praises to the Lord before all the earth.

The Psalms are so important because they train us to live our lives out of a **spirit of praise** and a **spirit of thanksgiving**—even if we feel like we’re hitting a wall, or just not feeling it at all. And yet, even in the midst of these challenges, by the grace of God, we can change the tune. We can change our tune by singing a new song.

But it’s still important to be realistic and honest about things. There are more than 350,000 churches in America. Two-thirds of them have plateaued or are declining. Anywhere from 6000-10,000 churches every year close their doors—forever.

- In 2018, a study found that more people in America identify as NONEs (meaning they have no religious affiliation) than the largest religious blocks in America. NONEs compose 23.1% of the U.S. population. There are more NONEs than Evangelicals (22.6%) or Catholics (23%).
- In the last ten years The Pew Research Center did a survey that indicated the percentage of Christians in the US population dropped twelve percentage points. 77% of Americans were Christians ten years ago, to 65% of Americans are Christians today.
- According to Gallup, in 2017 20% of Americans attend church on any given Sunday. That's 2 out of 10 Americans.

Should we weep and wring our hands? *No.*

Sing a new song? *Yes.*

Why? We hum a new tune and proclaim, not the end of Christendom, but we proclaim a new hope, the greatest missional opportunity before us the West has ever known, to sing a new song that is new to a whole mass of people. Jesus commands us:

*Go into all the world and make disciples of all nations.*

We also have another whole new world to reach:

*Go into the world wide web, and make digital disciples.*

Whether we are in the world we live in or in the world wide web, we want all of creation to sing a new song. So we've got to share our song with everyone—near and far, in person and virtually.

Did you know that every month, over 30,000 people google "online church"? Think about it. We at Immanuel have the potential to connect, not just with people in Tucson, but we have the opportunity through our mission and online worship to sing a new song with a whole bunch of other people, in Tempe, Tahoe, Tulsa, Tampa, Tacoma, and even Toronto, and maybe even Tokyo! We have people from multiple states worshipping with us now. Sing to the Lord a new song. Singing a new song helps bring us out of our small imprisonments and to break free of ourselves, our patterns, and the confinement of our thinking. We can have the mind of Christ with this new song.

In 2021 and beyond, we want to step out into even more mission than we're already doing. Instead of growing inward, we want to tithe 10% of our pledged budget to mission. It's a stretch, but we can do it, if we really go for it, if we give cheerfully, and if we give until it hurts. We just need faith the size of a mustard seed, Jesus tells us, and it can move mountains. Not only move mountains out of our way, but it can move mountains to praise God. This is yet another way for us to invite the whole earth to join in God's joyous song, the act of mission.

Let's go all out Immanuel. Use all you can to praise God. Be a living instrument and play to God's glory. It's a holy hootenanny that's going on. Join in the jam. Don't be left out. It's going on everywhere. Can you hear it? With the eyes of faith, ears of faith, and voice of faith, every bush, is not only a burning bush, but a singing bush. It can be hard work and even a bit uncomfortable and unfamiliar to learn a new tune. You have to kind of stumble along to get a sense for what the melody is. Stretch yourself! Broaden your horizons!

No matter what age we find ourselves in, middle school, middle age, a tweenager, teenager, or keenager, or anywhere in between, a new song is a fitting response to God's mercies that are new every morning. Keep your new song fresh. Don't let it grow stale. Don't play it mechanically or merely by rote. Put your heart, soul, and lungs into it. By God's grace, we can sing a new song, even in the midst of adversity because in Christ we have the victory. We go from adversity to victory. Our battles may continue, but the war has been won! In Christ Jesus, Paul says, we're more than conquerors—we can overcome evil, overcome our past, overcome viruses, overcome those things that seek to keep us down and hold us back.

So sing Immanuel, sing! Sing your way through the cliffs of despair, across the heights of jubilation, and over the summits of success. Whistle in the dark valleys of the shadow of death and the barren wastelands of discouragement. Hum your new song through the swelling torrents of stress and harmonize through the hills of the ho-hum.

There is something about singing this new song together that frightens away our fears, lifts our spirits, and fills us with thankfulness so we can forge ahead, along our pilgrim way. We all need spiritual sound checks and sounding boards, people to help us to not be off key and be more pitch perfect. Psalm 98 reminds us we can't do this alone. We're in this together. Don't go solo in your faith. Remain tuned to Christ who is our Middle C. God is our Conductor who turns the cacophony of our lives into a symphony orchestrated by the Holy Spirit. God blends together our many different voices, altos, sopranos, baritones, tenors, and bass so we can harmonize together for a much richer sound. Christ our Voice Coach can help us find our voice and carry a tune.

We need all the different parts coordinated together: melody, harmony, and background vocals. Even a little dissonance at the right time makes for some good music. The Spirit is our metronome, keeping us in time with God's rhythm. And at just the right time, God gives us the gift of rest and silence, which is a must for all great compositions. Our new song opens us up and frees us up to be generous in spirit, generous in service, and generous with our resources, all to God's honor and glory. And not only that, it's fun to give back to God and to others. And every time we worship, whether online or in person, it's a dress rehearsal for when Christ comes again and sets all things right so we can sing, not only with the heavenly host, but with that great cloud of witnesses.

So Immanuel, let's keep singing and sharing our new song for 2021. We have good reason to sing because God is our victor in the past, God is our king in the present, and God is our judge in the Future.

Amen.

Sermon Art: *"Make a Joyful Noise"* created by [The Salt Project](#)

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