

# *A New Song*

## WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

4<sup>th</sup> in a four-part series

December 18, 2022

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*Psalm 96:1-6, 11-13 (NRSV)*

<sup>1</sup>O sing to the LORD a new song;  
sing to the LORD, all the earth.  
<sup>2</sup>Sing to the LORD, bless his name;  
tell of his salvation from day to day.  
<sup>3</sup>Declare his glory among the nations,  
his marvelous works among all the  
peoples.  
<sup>4</sup>For great is the LORD, and greatly to be  
praised;  
he is to be revered above all gods.  
<sup>5</sup>For all the gods of the peoples are idols,  
but the LORD made the heavens.  
<sup>6</sup>Honor and majesty are before him;  
strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.  
<sup>11</sup>Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth  
rejoice;  
let the sea roar, and all that fills it;  
<sup>12</sup> let the field exult, and everything in it.  
Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for  
joy <sup>13</sup>before the LORD; for he is coming,  
for he is coming to judge the earth.  
He will judge the world with righteousness,  
and the peoples with his truth.

*Romans 1:1-7 (Good News)*

From Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus and an  
apostle chosen and called by God to preach his  
Good News.

<sup>2</sup>The Good News was promised long ago  
by God through his prophets, as written in the  
Holy Scriptures. <sup>3</sup>It is about his Son, our Lord  
Jesus Christ: as to his humanity, he was born a descendant of David; <sup>4</sup>as to his divine  
holiness, he was shown with great power to be the Son of God by being raised from  
death. <sup>5</sup>Through him God gave me the privilege of being an apostle for the sake of  
Christ, in order to lead people of all nations to believe and obey. <sup>6</sup>This also includes you  
who are in Rome, whom God has called to belong to Jesus Christ.

<sup>7</sup>And so I write to all of you in Rome whom God loves and has called to be his own  
people:

May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace.

*The angels bring glad tidings of great joy, a new song, which we are all  
called to sing throughout the world.*

*A servant of Christ?*

It may seem a bit odd to you that the opening verses of Paul's letter to the Romans is  
one of the Lectionary readings for the fourth Sunday in Advent. There is barely a  
mention of Jesus' birth. Nonetheless, Paul speaks of the "Good News that was promised  
long ago" (1:2), the same "good news of great joy" brought by the herald angels at  
Jesus' birth (Luke 2:10). But before we get to Paul's explanation of the Good News, let's  
take a closer look at the beginning of this letter.

### A Song of Good News

The theme of Psalm 96 is  
simple: God reigns! The psalm is  
a proclamation: "tell of his  
[God's] salvation from day to  
day. Declare his glory . . ." (v. 2-  
3). As Clinton McCann writes,  
"Psalm 96 articulates the good  
news that forms the theological  
heart of the book of Psalms: God  
reigns."<sup>1</sup> Psalm 96 is often  
referred to as one of the  
"enthronement" psalms; it is  
about God's rule and the joy that  
means for each person, each  
creature, and every corner of all  
creation.

Psalm 96 is often read on  
Christmas Day because it makes  
the point that Jesus' birth  
marked the coming of God's  
kingdom and God's rule. Jesus'  
birth is a royal birth, marked by  
Herald Angels who announce the  
Good News, the Glad Tidings  
(*evangelion* in the Greek), that a  
King had been born. Thus, the  
question posed by Psalm 96 and  
by Jesus' birth is the same: Will  
we submit ourselves to God's  
sovereignty?

1. from McCann's commentary on  
Psalms in *The New Interpreter's Bible*,  
1996.

The NRSV, the NIV, the Good News and many other modern translations mislead us a bit at the opening of the letter. In the Greek, Paul refers to himself as a *doulos*, a slave or bond-servant. In Paul's world, slaves had no social standing whatsoever, in a society where social standing mattered more than anything else. Slaves had no prospects. They were there simply to do what they were told. N.T. Wright notes that if we think Paul means some sort of "free agent who happened to work as a cleaner or butler" we miss the point entirely.<sup>1</sup> Paul has brought to Jesus nothing that matters in the eyes of the world; he is simply a slave of Christ. And he is a slave that has been called by God to proclaim the Good News. Paul would probably speak of Ebenezer Scrooge's "call" on Christmas Eve. And for what purpose has Paul been called? Paul has been called not for his own sake, but so that he might be an apostle, a messenger carrying God's Good News.

David Schlafer reflects on Paul's call in this Advent passage:

"Called"—Paul makes it sound so simple and straightforward! Three times in the space of his letter's *long* first sentence, Paul tosses off the term without hesitation, qualification, or seeming awareness of how debatable his claim might be. Especially since this "call" is supposedly from *God*, and asserted to apply to his *listeners* as well, anyone within the reach of Paul's voice might be pardoned for raising an eyebrow!

Calls from God are notorious—mental institutions are full of folks who "hear" them. Calls from God can be noxious—untold numbers of innocent victims are maimed or murdered because true believers follow through on a mission inspired by an unquestioned call.

Amid all the pitches that are pressed upon us at this time of the year (Buy *this*! Give to *that*!); amid all the internal impulses that surge to consciousness during the days before Christmas (I *must have* this! I *should do* that!)—how do we discern to *what* we are "called," and *by whom*?

What seems a clear trumpet one day can, on the following day, be muted, distant, silent. What is unmistakable and incontrovertible to one side of a political or religious debate is just not heard by the other. It is hard enough to get clear on one's own call. What gives anyone the assurance (to say nothing of the authority) to lay claim to the call of another? As a noun (a "call") or a past-tense verb ("called"), the word carries connotations of fixed and final—something issued and uttered (and answered, ignored, or declined), rather than an unsettled, ambiguous, open-ended process of dawning, discovery, and development (as in "a calling").

While Paul does not seem (at first hearing, anyway) to address such questions and concerns in his introduction to the Christians in Romans, they cannot help but be live for us. (They would surely also be in play for Joseph in the dream narrative with which Matthew commences his Gospel. The God who speaks to him in a disturbing dream is, after all, the same God who has given the law Joseph is attempting to honor in relation to Mary—not slavishly obeying, but sensitively applying it.)

The more that is at stake in a call, the more urgent these questions become. Advent is not just about *awaiting* a clearly anticipated call; it is also about seeking a space in the midst of a cacophony, for discerning what *is* call, here and now; and what response is called for and feasible at this particular point.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>From Wright's commentary on Romans in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, 2002. It has not only the more technical commentary, but also reflections on all passages in the Bible and the Apocrypha. I recommend it highly.

<sup>2</sup>David J. Schlafer, "Homiletical Perspective on Romans 1:1-7," in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year A*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 1 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 87–89.

### *“Promised long ago”*

When Paul speaks of God’s Good News promised long ago, he reminds his readers that Jesus’ arrival was the culmination of a story that began with Abraham. It is the story of God’s faithfulness to his promises, what we might call God’s covenant faithfulness. God had made a covenant with his people, a covenant grounded in steadfast love. God had promised to redeem creation and to restore his people to a full and right relationship with God.

Though it must have seemed to many Jews in Paul’s day that God wasn’t doing so well at keeping his promises, God is not only the great covenant-maker, God is the great covenant-keeper. Thus, when the people proved unable to keep their end of the covenant, which was simply to love God and to love neighbor, God would keep the covenant for them -- and for us. The Good News is that in Jesus, God-made-flesh, God did for us what we are unable to do for ourselves. Our own faithfulness, our own believing and obeying, is the only appropriate response to God’s faithfulness. When we come to the manger, we find that God has given us, just as he gave Paul, the *privilege* of vocation. Paul was given his work to do; each of us is given our work to do.

So what do we bring when we bring ourselves to the manger? Paul knows that we bring nothing, we are merely slaves-to-the-King. Even our desire to come to the manger is a gift from God. We approach this child, the King of Kings, with empty hands.

### *Final thoughts and a few questions*

As I noted above, Paul opens his letter to the Christian house churches in Rome with blunt directness: he is a “slave of Jesus Christ.” What do you think he means? What might he be trying to convey to his readers? You might make a list and then discuss of all the dimensions that Paul’s “slavery” might entail. Certainly, this includes doing as the master commands. But what else? It will help us to remember that Jesus and Paul lived a society driven by honor and shame. For example, money was important only insofar as it helped a person gain social standing and respect. Yet, a slave had no social

### Living the With-God Life

Of the many beliefs that made the Israelites seem peculiar to their neighbors, few were more peculiar than their belief that there was one God, the Creator of the Cosmos, who dwelt with them. They even built God a house! First a moveable tent they called a tabernacle and then the temple in Jerusalem. God’s people didn’t think they could somehow enclose God in a tent, but they did believe that God dwelt with them in a way that God did not dwell with others.

With the coming of Christ, all of God’s people – collectively and individually – are dwelling places of God. This is what Paul means when he speaks of the church and the believers as being God’s temples (e.g., see 1 Cor 3:16-17 and 1 Cor 6:19-20). During Advent, we’ve been singing of Immanuel. When Matthew uses the title “Immanuel” for Jesus (1:23), it is because he understands Jesus is the fulfillment of the biblical story of God’s everlasting intent to live with his people. “Immanuel” is a name which means “God is with us.” It is this “with-God” life to which we are called and in which we will find the life we seek.

Richard Foster, Dallas Willard, Eugene Peterson, and others speak of this as The Immanuel Principle of life. They note that “The Bible is all about human life ‘with God.’ It is about how God has made this ‘with’ life possible and will bring it to pass. In fact, the name Immanuel, meaning ‘God is with us,’ is the title given to the one and only Redeemer because it refers to God’s everlasting intent for human life – namely, that we should be in every aspect a dwelling place of God. Indeed, the unity of the Bible is discovered in the development of life ‘with God’ as a reality on earth, centered in the person of Jesus.”

standing whatsoever. They ranked lower on the ladder than shepherds, who were themselves despised.

Why do you think that most English translators use “servant of Jesus Christ” rather than slave or even bond-servant? What do we lose in translation? I should note that Eugene Peterson uses “devoted slave” in his paraphrase “The Message.” Here is another piece of data: the King James Version uses “servant,” giving rise to a couple of other questions. What role does tradition play in how we translate the Bible’s Hebrew and Greek? How might the meaning of “servant” have changed from the days of King James to our own? Regardless, I think it is safe to say that “free-agent servanthood” is far from what Paul means. To whom do we really belong?

## **Scott Engle’s Bible Classes**

### **Monday Afternoon Class**

Current study: *1 Thessalonians*. *We will soon go on to 2 Thessalonians.*

**No class on December 26**

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott’s Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC.”

### **Tuesday Lunchtime Class**

Current study: *A Brief History of Christmas*

***We begin 1 Samuel on January 3. Join us!***

**No class on December 27**

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott’s Facebook ministry page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC”. [Note – I’m having a lot of problems with “junk content blocking” of my Tuesday class. So, the most reliable way to hear the class is on the podcast, at [scottengle.podbean.com](http://scottengle.podbean.com).)

*About the weekday classes:*

Join us whenever you can. Each week’s lesson stands on its own. This is very “drop-in.” Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at [scottengle.podbean.com](http://scottengle.podbean.com). They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by “Scott Engle Bible Studies”.

### **Scott’s Sunday Class**

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott’s Facebook page. Search for “Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC.”

**No class on Dec 25 and Jan 1**

**Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott’s YouTube channel.** Search for “Scott Engle.” These videos are posted as soon as possible after class. [Note – I’m having a lot of problems with “junk content blocking” of my Tuesday class. So, the most reliable way to hear the class is on the podcast, at [scottengle.podbean.com](http://scottengle.podbean.com).)