

**Sermon preached at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia,
by Pastor David Fischler, on Sunday, July 1, 2012**

SING AMONG THE NATIONS

Psalm 96:1-13

I don't know about you, but I love to sing. I'm not sure why that's funny, but I do. I started singing in the fourth grade when I was in my elementary school choir. In the fifth grade I was also in chorus, but then in the sixth grade my voice changed and they kicked me out. Ever since then I've wanted to sing again and there have been a number of occasions where I thought that might be possible. For instance, when I was in college Bob Dylan called me. This was during his Christian period when he said he had converted to Christ in the early 70s and put out several albums with Christian themes. He called and said that he heard that I wanted to sing and he wanted to give me the opportunity to be on one of his albums. I said, "I'm incredibly honored by that. What is it that you're looking for?" He said, "Well, this is a Christian-themed album and I need a voice that sounds like it's demon-possessed." Needless to say I turned that down.

Then many years later in the middle part of the last decade, the Defense Department contacted me. My suspicion was that somebody from DOD had heard me singing in church and so they told me they wanted a recording of my voice. I said, "I'd be glad to give it to you, but what do you want it for?" They said they needed something to take the place of water-boarding. Unfortunately I got a call from the CIA a couple weeks later and they said that would violate their code of professional ethics and would also be against the Geneva Convention.

Probably the nadir of all of this was a couple of years ago at the Cove. We were singing, as you do in worship, and I left my microphone on by mistake during the first hymn. One of the children turned to Maryanne, who was keeping the nursery that day and asked, "What's that terrible noise?" She said, "It's all right. It'll be over in a minute. Pastor David's just torturing a gerble."

All of which is to say that's probably an explanation as to why everything sounds funny here. I think I can sing, but the world has rendered a different judgment. But I don't care about the world's judgment because I've been given different instructions. In the 96th Psalm I am told, as are all of us, to sing to the Lord a new song, sing to the Lord all the earth. I can't carry a tune. I know that, but the Lord wants me to sing and so, together, we're called to sing. And we're called to sing for a purpose.

This psalm can be divided into two parts. The first has to do particularly with what we are called to do and that is to worship – to sing, among other things – but to worship as witnesses to the nations. We're called to sing to the Lord, we're called to praise His name and we're called to tell of His great deeds. Verses 1-3 go on to say, "Sing to the Lord, praise His name; proclaim His salvation day after day." We sing because that's our deepest, most authentic, from-the-heart form of worship. It is for most of us. Preaching

is wonderful but, frankly, I feel like I am worshipping the Lord just as well, if not better, when in my own single-note form of singing I raise my voice to Him.

We're called to praise His name, in verse 2, as a form of proclamation that focuses on Him and therefore on what He has done. We're to proclaim His salvation day after day. Our singing isn't about us. It's not about how it makes us feel, though there's nothing wrong with it making us feel good. It's not about our virtuosity. It's not about how many notes we can reach. It's about proclaiming His salvation. Our singing is about Him.

Verse 3 says, "Declare His glory among the nations, His marvelous deeds among all peoples." That's not just an isolated, off-the cuff way of saying, "Oh, and you should evangelize, too." These two things are part of one another. Our worship and our singing and our praise and our preaching and our celebration of the sacraments – all of it is a way of telling His marvelous deeds among all the nations.

We're called to declare His glory. That's an interesting expression. We're called to proclaim His glory because in doing so we proclaim the gospel to the nations. But it's also more specific, because by doing so we are called to announce His victory over the powers of darkness. The word for glory in Hebrew is a word that literally means "heavy." The reference is to the spoils of war that would weigh down warriors when they came back from battle. So when we proclaim God's glory, we're proclaiming how heavy He is, how weighed down with all the spoils of war that He has won in His victory over everything that stands against Him. "Declare His victory." That would be another way to put it.

He makes it easy for us to do that because He explains the situation in verses 4-6. He says in verse 4, "For great is the Lord and most worthy of praise; He is to be feared..." We'll stop there. Great is the Lord and most worthy to be praised. He is to be feared. He's called great – literally, mighty – to remind us that He is the omnipotent ruler of all. That has a particular meaning and we need to keep it in mind. We live in an age that overuses the word "great." Anybody here ever watch sports on TV? Baseball, football, basketball, hockey, tennis, golf, NASCAR – well, that's not really a sport. If you watch sports on TV you have heard the word "great" misused. I say that simply because it's so overused. Is it really likely that the part-time designated hitter for the Cleveland Indians is a great hitter? I guarantee, whoever that is, I can't tell you off the top of my head, will be referred to that way at some point in the course of the season. He's a great bunter, or he's a great opposite-field hitter, or he's a great lefty hitting righties. Somehow or another that word will be misused. In Scripture when God is referred to as great, it's not just a way of saying, "Yeah, God, you are really nifty." It's a way of saying He is the ruler of everything. He is all-powerful. He is in charge. He's not just somebody to look up to. He is somebody to bow down before.

He's said to be worthy of praise because of all that He's done and all that He is. And He is said to be feared because He is awe-inspiring. Not just that we should be afraid of Him. There is a reason to be afraid of God in the same way that a child should properly

be just a little bit afraid of their parents. Children should be just a little bit afraid of their parents. Just enough to form respect. As Bill Cosby once told Theo on the *Cosby Show*, “I brought you into this world and I can take you out.” Parents might not be able to do that literally, but God can. So we should be a little bit afraid of Him, but beyond the element of fear, as in being afraid, there’s the element of fear as in “awesome.” That’s really what the word means there. He is to be feared. He is to be revered. He is to be held above. He is awe-inspiring. And part of the reason for that is because He is the one and only.

Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise. He is to be feared specifically above all gods. That means that, we have Baal and we have Zeus, and we have Jupiter, and we have all the other gods of the peoples and we kind of set them aside and we recognize that He’s the God above all other gods. No! That’s not what it means! It does not mean that we can recognize that the gods of the peoples, all the various gods that other people worship, are real. We don’t say, “Well, you know, Krishna is good enough for folks in India, good enough for Hindus. Krishna is okay there. But we worship the Lord God Almighty.” No! What the psalmist is saying is something very different. He says in verse 5, “For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the Lord made the heavens.” All the gods of the peoples, all the gods that the world wants to tell us today are on a par, just other names for or other ways to God, all have one thing in common. They aren’t real. An idol isn’t just a statue. An idol, more particularly, is something that *we* make, that *we* create, and something that I create didn’t create me. Something that I create doesn’t rule me. Something that I create is something that I can set aside at any time. I can go through all the motions of bowing down and making sacrifice and praying to it, but if I one day wake up and say, “You know, he’s just not getting it done. Krishna, Baal, Isis. No, I’m going to try somebody else.” That’s the way an idol works. We do that to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and things will be very, very different.

The psalmist says of those idols that they are worthless. Worthless means that they are unworthy of worship. They’re unworthy of allegiance. They’re unworthy of anything people would give them. They’re just things. And the proof of that is in creation. Whereas we create idols, the true God creates us and all other things. Creation demonstrates that He has what the idols and gods of the nations do not have, what the psalmist mentions in verse 6, “Splendor and majesty are before Him; strength and glory are in His sanctuary.” It is He who has splendor and majesty, He who has strength and glory. Not the gods that humanity has created for itself. Only the One who created humanity and redeemed it. He is the One to whom we may ascribe these things.

That brings us to the second part of the psalm which calls upon the nations to respond. In the first part of the psalm we are called to proclaim. The people of God are told to worship the Lord and as you lift your voices in song, in praise, in prayer, in proclamation, you will tell the nations about the God who has actually made them, who He is and what He has done.

Then in verses 7-13 you see how the nations are called to respond. We’re told first that all the nations are to ascribe to God. Verse 7 says, “Ascribe to the Lord, O families of

nations, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. Ascribe to the Lord the glory due His name; bring an offering and come into His courts.” They are to ascribe to the Lord. What that means is that they are to attribute to God those characteristics that the people of God recognize in Him. They are to look at their own gods and say, “There’s nothing there.” They are to look at the God who created heaven and earth and say, “Ah, strength and majesty, splendor and glory, are His and His alone.” They are to attribute to Him characteristics that the people of God recognize in Him. Ascribe to the Lord the glory due His name. Recognize that He has triumphed. He has triumphed over the devil and all his deeds. He has triumphed over the idols of the peoples who had no power in the first place and no way to stand up against Him. He has triumphed over all that stands against Him. Glory and strength.

So victory and power is what they are to ascribe first. Second, they are to ascribe to Him the splendor of His holiness. Verse 9 says, “Worship the Lord in the splendor of His holiness.” Recognize that He is not you. Because that’s essentially all an idol is. If Rob Mackey devises an idol and puts one up in his basement and offers sacrifice to it and praise to it, who is he talking to? Himself! All that sacrifice, what’s he going to do? Is he going to leave it there? No. If it’s food, he’s going to eat it. If it’s something else, he’s going to use it. The fact is that the idols that humanity make mirror who we are.

We’ve been talking in my Sunday School class about Jehovah’s Witnesses the last couple of months. One of the things that is really striking is that the Watchtower Society, the parent organization of Jehovah’s Witnesses, is essentially a totalitarian organization. It demands totally obedience. It demands unquestioning loyalty. And the picture of God that you get from the literature of the Watchtower Society looks exactly like they do. You can argue as a sociologist whether they came up with the picture of God first and then modeled the organization after it or vice versa. But either way you look at it, you’re talking about folks who have created an idol of God that looks just like they do. And that’s what all idols look like. God is very different. The true God is holy. He is holy. He’s separate from us. He’s intimately connected to us but He is separate from us. He is magnificent in a way that we can’t even conceive of and that’s what necessitates that degree of separation. You remember in Isaiah 6, the prophet, just in a vision, not in reality, saw himself before the throne of God and he fell down on his face because he recognized that he was not worthy to stand in the presence of Almighty God. You remember in Exodus 3, Moses comes before the burning bush and realizes very quickly that he’s in a place that isn’t necessarily the best one to be in. He’s in the presence of the living God and the living God tells him what he should do in order to be able to remain in that presence. You don’t treat an idol that way. You treat one who carries with Him the splendor of holiness in that way.

Ascription is also, then, to bring submission and praise. They are to worship the Lord and they’re to tremble before Him. Tremble before Him, all the earth, recognizing that this isn’t an idol with whom they can get familiar. This isn’t an idol they can control or they can treat in any way that they care to. Rather, they are dealing with the Lord and King of all.

I find myself genuinely puzzled when I see those bumper stickers on cars that say, “God is my co-pilot.” Have you seen those? If you have one on your car, I want to talk to you afterwards. God is my co-pilot. Why don’t you just come out and say, “I’m an idol worshipper. I have re-created God in my own image and made Him just what I wanted Him to be.” That’s not what the psalmist is talking about here. Worship with trembling before Him. You don’t do that before a co-pilot. You give a co-pilot orders. Right? A pilot gives the co-pilot orders. Not the God that the psalmist describes. They are to bring an offering, according to verse 8, and come into His courts. Bring a sacrifice. Not to appease wrath but to acknowledge His greatness in order to ascribe to Him the glory due His name. They bring an offering and they come into His courts, which is kind of a striking thing for the psalmist to say, if you think about it, because for much of us throughout history the conception was that the nations had no business being in the temple. If you’re familiar with the way that the Temple was constructed, it was a series of courts or courtyards and each courtyard enabled one to come closer and closer to the holy of holies, which was thought to be the place of God’s residence. The outermost court was the court of the Gentiles. They could come through the front door, yes, but they couldn’t go in the living room. They could come in the front door but they couldn’t come in the living room because we all know the Gentiles are dirty and have no manners and don’t wipe their feet when they come in the front door, so they track in mud, so we have to keep them as far away from the presence and the inhabitation of God as we can get them. But the psalmist here says something different. “Come into His courts.” That’s an expression that’s used for Israel repeatedly when talking about its own worship, which was not confined to the courts of the Gentiles but went all the way to the holy of holies.

Well, those among the nations who have come to Him now, interestingly enough having been brought by the proclamation of the people of God, are then to turn around themselves and do the same. Verse 10 and following say, “Say among the nations, [and this is speaking to the nations now] ‘the Lord reigns.’ The world is firmly established, it cannot be moved; He will judge the people with equity...” and goes on and tells them what they are to tell the nations and what in fact all creation proclaims. The fields, the trees of the forest, the sea, and so on, all proclaim the same message. And that message is that God is going to judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in His truth. And He is going to ask the question, “How have they responded to me? Have they rejected me and instead turned to idols of their own making? Or have they instead embraced me? My truth, my righteousness, my forgiveness, my power, my victory. Have they embraced that and in the process embraced me?” And on that day, people of every nation, Jew and Gentile, white and black, male and female, slave and free, people of every tribe and tongue and nation will come together into His courts and they will lift their voices and they will sing.