

Time of Grace Ministry
Here I Am Lord: With a Desire to Be Useful
Psalm 100
December 24, 2017

Pastor Michael Novotny

When I was a kid, our church had a blind organist. No joke. I would drag my mom up to the balcony of our church. We would sit in the last row of the very corner seats and I would watch, mesmerized, as our blind organist played worship Sunday after Sunday.

But what fascinated me most of all as a kid was her dog. She had a seeing eye dog that would lead her up to the balcony of the church. He would lay down next to her feet and the entire worship service, I would try to get that dog's attention. I would make faces, I would wave subtly so that my mom couldn't see me and that dog barely gave me one look all those years. And I wonder what God thought of that? Here I was in his presence, in his word, celebrating the birth of Jesus and the life of Jesus and the death of Jesus and the resurrection of Jesus and I got distracted by something so small and something so insignificant.

Today, Pastor Jeske is going to remind us that when we show up in the presence of God, when we walk into his house, we should come with expectation and joy. God desires to use us, to make us part of his grand plan to show love and bring forgiveness and grace to the whole world. We walk into his house ready to hear about the birth of our Savior Jesus and we leave with an expectation to do great things in the name of Jesus.

Pastor Mark Jeske

Psalm 100 is very short; just a couple of little verses. And don't confuse it though by the fact that it's short; don't confuse that with being not so significant. It's not the quantity of what's in this psalm but these verses, these very few verses, basically cut deep inside of us and help to transplant there the right kind of attitude and spirit that we bring when we are in God's presence.

Psalm 100 is one of the anonymous psalms; it's only – it's called a Mizmor in Hebrew – a psalm for giving thanks. It's a thanksgiving – a thanking psalm. It's the end of a little set. Psalm 91 through 100 are anonymous and the common theme seems to be the Lord reigning; these are majesty psalms. They're psalms for going to church when you are entering the gates as though you were entering the temple and about to step into God's presence for that was as close as people got to God before the days when God walked the earth in the form of Jesus. Going to the temple – first the tabernacle, then the temple in Jerusalem – was as close as you can get because the glory of the Lord, the bright cloud of the presence of the Lord, actually sat right on top of the ark of the covenant in the deepest, innermost, recess of that temple. And though the people were not allowed in there to look at it, they knew he was in there. So this was as close as you physically or visibly would get to your God. And it was not just going to church; it was – we're stepping into the very presence of God himself. And this psalm helps us to get our attitude straight. So let's take a little bit of a look at it.

“Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth.” A word or two of the most important word in that first sentence, which is L-O-R-D. In your Bible, it’s got all capital letters and that’s not a misprint or an editorial whoops or an accident; it’s done that way on purpose to give you a heads up that you are looking at an untranslatable word. In Hebrew, it would be pronounced Yahweh; is a play on words of God’s sacred name “I Am.” And it emphasizes the fact that he has infinite existence. Unlike you and me who had a beginning, God had no beginning. And you might say, “That’s impossible,” and I would say, “Yeah, you’re probably right.” You would say, “I can’t comprehend that,” and I’d say, “Yeah, probably not.” And you would say, “I can’t wrap my head around that. That does not fit with our universe,” and I would say, “You’re right. He’s above and beyond the universe.” In fact, he made our universe. In complete independent sovereign existence from all eternity backwards and forwards and he fills the universe in the here and now; our here and now. For God, everything is the here and now for he sees the whole world and all of the workings of the universe and all of its deeds and every day are as accessible to God right now. It’s as though everything for God is an eternal present. He just sees; sees it all. And this is whom we worship.

He’s also I Am. This word, Yahweh, also means a God who is rock steady in his plans and he has announced that his great mission is to reconnect with every one of his lost children – that would be you and me. And he’s rock steady in that purpose and will spare no energy or expense to gain us back. In fact, his ultimate gift, the ultimate gift of the LORD - with capital letters – the ultimate gift of Yahweh was to give the gift of his Son. This is whom we worship. And although this is the God who also will judge the world, this is not the name that is attributed to him when he is doing his judging activity. This is his covenant name of how he desires to have a personal relationship with you for this is his personal name. Again, unfortunately, untranslatable. The closest equivalent we have in English is the made up word Jehovah.

“Shout for joy to him all the earth and serve the Lord with gladness and come before him with joyful songs.” Three times what do you hear that the dominant emotion of people is when you encounter God? Joy. Happiness. I’m happy to be here, Lord. And all I do to give you worship is not from fear, it’s not coming from fear, it’s not coming from pressure, not coming from guilt. I am happy to give you the honor and the glory that you deserve. It’s my pleasure to give you worship. It’s my pleasure to serve you. More on that later; I’ll come back to that in just a moment.

It’s my pleasure to come before you with joyful songs. Lord, you invented music to make us happy but you also invented music so we’d have a vehicle more artistically to express our appreciation back to you; coming right back to you, O Lord. Ironically, this psalm had music to it at one time but there was no way for it to be preserved. There were no mechanical forms of recording musical sounds back then. In fact, there were – those would not exist for another 2,900 years after this was written – and they had not yet devised a form of musical notation which did not arise until Europe, probably in the 1400s, is when musical notation began in its rudimentary form to show pitches and the duration of sounds and notes. So the songs that went with these words have perished and nobody has any idea what this one might have sounded like originally. We have new songs, new music to put with it, but God loves to hear his praises not only in talk but in music, as well.

“Know that Yahweh, the Lord, is God.” Not Baal; Baal is not God. The Lord is God. Not Asherah. Not Marduk. Not Bel. Not Ashur. None of the gods of the people around them – not Moloch or Chemosh; they are not God – Yahweh, the Lord, is God. So focus, focus, focus on the one. There are not many paths to heaven; there is but one. There are not many gods and goddesses. Unlike the world of the Greeks and Romans where St. Paul and Jesus had their ministries where the world was thought to be populated with many deities. There is only one. They thought that basically their gods and goddesses were superhuman but they were just great, big people with all of our vices. The gods and goddesses of the Greeks and Romans were jealous, were violent, they came crashing through people’s lives, disrupting, raping, taking, pushing people around. They were jealous, moody deities who needed to be placated and so people would offer sacrifices not because they loved those deities but because they were scared of them or they wanted something. So you do a transaction. You could do business with the gods, at least in their minds. This God you don’t do business with. He has built a universe and invites you to participate in his world. He’s not coming to your world. He’s letting you live in his.

“It is he who made us and we are his.” I challenge you to make up your mind of whether you believe what you just heard because it changes how you look at your world. This psalm reorients our thinking. It’s he who made us; thus we are his. I belong to you. Is that demeaning? Does that make you feel like a piece of property? Like chattel? Is this a form of slavery?

You know, it’s kind of comforting, actually. I think if you tried it a little bit I think you’re going to kind of like it because it means that the Lord of the universe pays attention to you and thinks you have value. He thinks you’re worth something. You’re not on your own floating through the universe trying to scratch out an existence and trying to invent some meaning; something that might make sense in your life as a reason to keep struggling and keep living. He has given you a place in a world of his design. He says to you and me: “You’re my people. You’re sheep of my pasture.”

Man, of all the animals that the Bible had to come up with to describe you and me, would you pick sheep? Is that who you’d like to be? You baaa’d girls out there and you baaa’d boys. Do you – can you think of any athletic teams that use sheep as their mascot? Go, sheep, go! Go, sheep, go! That is your metaphor, your animal metaphor.

And I’m inviting you to embrace it because it’s true. You and I are juicy tidbits whom Satan is eager to devour. You have no power against the evil one if you did not have God’s iron dome of protection over you and if you did not have his shepherd staff ready to whack any demon from hell who tries to overstep the bounds and limits that God has set. He does allow you to be tested, just as Adam and Eve were tested and tempted, too. But only within limits of what he thinks you can handle. Your God is steering your life. You may have spotted him at it, you may have seen him at work. More likely, he does his work so indirectly that you’re only aware of the results but it has a good purpose and he’s steering you in the directions that he would like your life to go.

And so when you come to church, get your head on straight. “Enter his gate with thanksgiving; come with praise. Give thanks to him and praise his name.” Why? Three big reasons: “He is good.” Unlike the gods and goddesses of the ancient world whom people dreamed up, were

selfish and capricious and violent and quirky and totally into their own stuff that you had to go buy off, this is a God who first gives you everything and invites your response. He fronts it to you. Recklessly, trustingly, fronts you the forgiveness of your sins. The shepherd who guides you himself was slaughtered like a sheep, like a lamb before her shearers and he absorbed the blow of the judgment of God and condemnation for our sins on the cross and slaughtered as a Lamb of God in order to become your shepherd. You don't have to fear this kind of leadership because it's self-sacrificing leadership. He is good to us. He spoils you; daring to give you more than you could even handle and risks having you become a materialistic pig. He's that good because he loves to please you and make you happy. He loves stuff to make your life better. He surrounds you with wonderful people and invites you to see the treasures that you have in your relationship.

Second, he loves you! Though your love for him is like the S&P 500 Index or like the Dow Jones Average – it's going like this all the time – his love for you is steady; like a steady hot flame that never quits. And even when you have been ignoring God, even when you've been blowing him off and contradicting what you know to be his rules for your behavior, even when you start to flirt with different kinds of philosophies that you know contradict his word, even when you show a lot more interest in your TV than in your Bible, he doesn't stop loving you. He doesn't love you less because you fail him now and again. He doesn't love you less because you sin. He loves you unconditionally. What can you do but praise him and make some joyful noises for him?

And last, his faithfulness! He is rock steady faithful. He will not quit. Even when you have run away like a prodigal son, he stays at your heels like a border collie. He's nipping at you, trying to steer you around and pull you back in. He never lies and never goes back on his word; never changes his mind and has determined that his great mission and the Spirit's great mission is not only to bring you to faith but now to keep you in faith.

So let's kind of wrap this up with thinking about our attitude. What attitude do you bring into God's house? I fear that out of laziness or selfishness or stupidity, sometimes you bring the wrong kind of attitude. You bring the attitude I bring when I head into our TV room and I pick up the remote. So I'll give you a little demonstration of how I look when I slump down in our recliner chair in our TV room. Ready? Alright, here's me. If you have rabbit ears, you've got several dozen choices; maybe all of them suck that day. If you've got cable, you've got a hundred. If you've got dish, you've got 900 or 1,000 or more. And you know, I think there might be some of you satellite renters who might have clicked through all 900 channels on one day and nothing – didn't like any of them; nothing pulled you in. Come on, amuse me! Entertain me. Give me something I like. Here I am. What do you got? Bring it on.

If you walk into church like that, you're sunk already. You've got nothing. What's God supposed to do, jump and dance for you? People wanted Jesus to act like that: "Come on, miracle man! Do us a trick! Do another one of your tricks. Do that healing thing. Do that thing with the bread and the fish. I heard – my friend was at your bread and fish show. Do that for us!" And Jesus said, "Who are you, people? I'm not going to perform for you."

If you walk in with that kind of attitude, you'll go away with nothing and then you'll think, "Man, I got nothing today. That was nothing. There was nothing there for me today. That was so boring." What do you bring? Do you come on your knees aware of your sinful foolish failings? Do you come like a starving beggar needing food? Do you come grateful for the fact that he has gone first and given you everything? It changes. Instead of coming like, "Well, what do you got for me today? Hope there's something interesting here," and this is like you waiting for something to happen. This is like me with my remote. Or do you come saying, Lord, I'm not so worried what I'm going to get out of today as much as I want to concern myself with making sure you know how proud I am of you. How grateful I am you found me and chose me. How grateful I am to have been relieved of the nasty burden of my stupid sins of the past. How amazed I am that you could wash someone as dirty as me so clean. How you could still keep loving me though I have treated you often so indifferently. I'm so amazed, Lord, at what you're able to communicate with sometimes 3,000 year old documents to transform my life. Lord, everything in my life that's been really good has come from you and the parts when my life has been the emptiest and most painful is when I have been in rebelling against you. I want you to know how much I appreciate you and I'm coming in public to show that I am not ashamed of you. I'm proud of you and want to make a joyful noise to you in public so that I can out myself and people can see I'm with you. I'm with you, Lord, and I'm proud of you and I'm proud to be associated with you.

Now do you, per chance, have anything for me today? What do you want to tell me? I'm all ears and my heart is open. That's how to come in God's house. When you come with that attitude of humility, praise, worship and Thanksgiving and you open up your heart, he will fill you to the fullest. He will help you see how precious and valuable and important you are. To fight against Satan's temptations of depression because Satan is whispering, "You're worthless. You're stupid. You're lazy. You're a failure. Nobody likes you. You have no friends. Everybody's going to turn on you. Everybody's out to just hustle you and God thinks you're just a piece of waste and has nothing good for you. Nothing good is going to happen in your life. Nothing good ever happened for you," and he gets your head all twisted up.

When you come and open your heart, God will fill you with the good news that you're precious and valuable to him. You've been made to be a miniature version of him and he thinks you are priceless; worth dying for. And that changes the attitude you have as you leave God's house and that's where now I'd like to finish with that second verse. Here's the so what: So Serve the Lord with gladness. This is the paradox of living in the gospel, which is the backwards thinking. And here it is summed up in a nutshell: The more you give the more you get. And you might say, "Mark, that makes no sense." The more I give away the less I'll have!

That's obvious, isn't it? And I'd say, "Well, yeah, I suppose, but not in God's economy of things." Actually, in God's economy of things, the more generous you are the more he shovels right back into your life and he uses a bigger shovel. The more you love other people, the more love you will receive. And you might think, "No, man. The more energy I spend on other people the less I'll have for myself." And God says, "No, I'm sorry. You're wrong about that." The more you love the more you will be loved. And here is the paradox of the gospel: The more you serve the more you are served. The more energy you put into lifting somebody else up, whatever that might be, the more God will send people in your life to lift you up.

Do you believe that or do you think I am just full of gas this morning? Don't believe me – don't shoot the messenger – I'm just passing onto you one of God's divine principles that servanthood is the most fulfilling thing you can have. Whose life needs me to make it a little better today? You can start by practicing on your family. If you've got other people that share your apartment or home with you, try practicing it on them and shock them by asking what you can do for them today. Serve the Lord with gladness. You can't make him any richer than he is already but you can sure use your treasures to help somebody else. God has so much energy that he's showing off by building 50 billion times 50 billion stars. Clearly, there's no energy loss there. But there are people, wounded people, in your life that could stand a little bit of your energy and you will worship God and by serving them and lifting them up.

To be a servant means you – at your expense – you spend of yourself to make somebody else's life better. And this is not just one of many life options for you; this is a characteristic of the Christian life with an authentic Christian faith. If you say, "Lord Jesus, I believe in you and I count on your forgiveness," then let him see it by your attitude of a servant and instead of strutting around like a little lord or lady of the manor, waiting to see what you owe and what you all have coming and treating God like an ATM machine that you just go to whenever you want something and then ignore him until you're broke again, you don't have a relationship with your ATM machine, do you? You don't love the machine; it's just a thing and you only pay attention to it when you want something. And that's how God feels a lot of the time. Not if you have a servant spirit. And a servant spirit is, "Lord, I want to be useful to you. Help me to bring a smile to your divine face by my attitude of being a servant. Lord, make me a servant and I'm going to serve you with gladness."

You in or out? If you're in, say "Amen."

Pastor Michael Novotny

I hope you don't think I'm weird, but sometimes I picture invisible people. Sometimes when I'm at my kitchen table and my day is not going very well, when I've gotten a critical email or something happened that makes me a bit anxious and afraid, I look at those three empty chairs and I picture God. I picture God the Father and Jesus the Son and the Holy Spirit. And do you know what I see when I look at their invisible faces? I see joy. God makes this incredible promise that because Jesus Christ was born for you, because he lived a perfect life for you, because he gave his life on the cross for you and rose from the dead, that when God thinks about any one of his people, anyone who trusts in Jesus Christ, all there is is joy. The delight of a Father. The pride of Jesus, who is our big brother. The Holy Spirit who delights in us. The Scriptures say that God rejoices over us with singing and he is not ashamed to call us his sons, his daughters, his family.

I'm not sure what you're going through this Christmas season; maybe you feel like a disappointment, maybe you just feel like a pathetic sinner. Maybe you feel lonely; maybe you've lost your joy and your peace. So maybe you should picture invisible people; a God who is very much present and real. Even if you can't see him with the eyes, instead picture him with the eyes

of faith cause there you will see not just God, but a God who delights in you because of what Jesus has done for you.

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, it is so incredible to think that you have a place for us. Sometimes in our families, we feel like we are not needed. Sometimes in our schools, we feel like we are not wanted. Sometimes in our work places and our neighborhoods, we feel like no one notices. And then we think about you and you say that we are a member of the body of Christ and every part is necessary and useful. You say that the parts that seem weaker and dispensable are just the opposite; that we are integral to the work that you are doing in this world. Help us to value ourselves in the way that you value us. Help us not to insult the Holy Spirit, who uniquely wired us and knit us together in our mother's wombs. Help us to rejoice to think that you have a place and that you have a plan. We pray all these things in faith because we come to you in the name of your Son and our Savior, Jesus Christ. In his name we pray, Amen.

With Time of Grace, I'm Pastor Mike Novotny and it all starts now.