

“Come to This Place with a Song!”

Philippians 4:4-7; Psalm 100 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – April 25, 2021

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that our hearts might be filled with thanksgiving and our worship with song. In Jesus' name, Amen.

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.” That’s a tall order when we’ve been living through a pandemic for a year. As we noted during the season of Lent, there was a lot to endure this year: threat of disease and death, isolation, unfamiliar restrictions on where we could go and how to be in each other’s presence safely, racialized violence, unemployment, political division and unrest – the list goes on. We’re supposed to rejoice in the face of all that? And yet, as I was considering how to focus our stewardship campaign for the 2021-2022 ministry year, my only idea was that it must be grounded in gratitude. My friends, God is bringing us through! How could we not rejoice? How could we keep from proclaiming the goodness of God? How can we keep from singing? How can we not give thanks?

As I mentioned in the letter you should have gotten in the mail this week, there are three major reasons we are giving thanks this year. First of all, we look back: a year ago, we were so shaken by the pandemic and worried about what it might do to our congregation that we didn’t dare even hold a stewardship campaign. We wouldn’t have known how even if we’d wanted to. And look where we are now! Here on Zoom, celebrating our blessings and planning to gather at the Park next week, where

we'll collect up our Estimate of Giving cards and ask God's blessings on our intentions. When I think about all we've learned this year, all the many ways we've adapted and shifted, I am amazed.

If the beginning of our reading from Philippians seem like too much, the fourth sentence may be more apt for this moment we've been living in: "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." I don't know that we've managed to not worry at all, but throughout the year, we've made our needs known to God and God has provided. Just think of all the places in our shared life where God has been at work: helping us find new ways to connect in worship, sustaining and growing our small groups ministry, providing new approaches and new volunteers for our outreach ministries, and always, always, helping us support and care for one another with prayer and other signs of love.

A second reason this campaign is grounded in gratitude comes from a different way of looking back. There was no reason to believe that a small congregation like ours would be able to keep our heads above water financially in the face of a global pandemic. But God has brought us through! Our rental income dropped by half, but our giving held steady, and in some cases, even increased. You did that, through your faithful responses to God's love manifested here at VLM. That's what this campaign is all about. When we combine our gratitude for all God's blessings with intentional commitment to responding generously to those blessings, a powerful spiritual force

emerges. Some might call it the presence of the Holy Spirit. Some might call it the miracle of church. It's what happens when God's people name and proclaim the goodness of God and respond faithfully. What difference does it make to live knowing that you belong to God, as the psalmist declares? Your response to that knowledge is what builds up Christ's church. Giving is at its most pure when it's a rooted in gratitude. And ironically, coming through something as challenging as a pandemic has the potential to help us see our blessings more clearly.

There aren't many years when I could say to you, Let us give generously and gladly to our church because we're so grateful we still have a church to give to! But we all know it could have gone differently. There were moments that threatened to overwhelm us. We could have given up. You could have drifted away, one by one, because the effort to adapt and stay connected was too much. We could have squabbled ourselves to a breaking point. You could have allowed your pastor to struggle on her own till she, too, threw in the towel. But that's not what happened. Somehow, by the grace of God, we instead remembered and continually reminded ourselves that we are the sheep of God's pasture, that the Lord is near, that God's faithfulness is to all generations, including ours. Glory be! Make a joyful noise!

The third, but never final reason for the gratitude this campaign is rooted in looks forward, not back. Hope is on the horizon, my friends! For the first time in months, when we recorded the hymn videos for the worship kit, I didn't wear my mask to sing. I am now fully vaccinated, as is Deborah, so given the distance between

us, it finally felt safe. I cannot tell you how wonderful it felt! To sing full out, with abandon, without a steam sauna installed on my face was a revelation. In addition to calling us to gratitude for all God has done for us over the past year, Psalm 100 invites us to anticipate the beautiful day, soon to arrive, when we will gather again in the sanctuary and sing praise to God, together! Talk about powerful spiritual forces! There is a thing that happens when we blend our voices in song, and we've been missing it for a year. But it's coming back, and soon! I hope you will be there when that day arrives.

It is our hope to resume gathering for worship on the last Sunday of June, the day when our lay leaders make their commitments to service in the coming ministry year which starts July 1st. It's fitting that as all of us contemplate our financial commitments for the 2021-2022 ministry year, we are also anticipating these other commitments. For our money is not the only way we support the ministry of Vista La Mesa Christian Church. Our time, our talents, our presence, our voices, our humor, our caring, our passion – all these and more are what God uses to make us a church. When we return, we will “come to this place with a song!” And it will feel so good!

We are not there yet, but we're not where we were. God has brought us through! And one day soon, we will gather again to worship our God with a song. There is so much to give thanks for. Let us respond with grateful generosity and faithfulness! Hallelujah and Amen!