

## Praise God Anyway

2 Chronicles 5:2, 7, 8a, 11 – 14, 6:18



### *The Ark Brought to the Temple*

<sup>2</sup>Then Solomon assembled the elders of Israel and all the heads of the tribes, the leaders of the fathers' houses of the people of Israel, in Jerusalem, to bring up the ark of the covenant of the Lord out of the city of David, which is Zion. <sup>7</sup>Then the priests brought the ark of the covenant of the Lord to its place, in the inner sanctuary of the house, in the Most Holy Place, underneath the wings of the cherubim. <sup>8</sup>The cherubim spread out their wings over the place of the ark <sup>11</sup>And when the priests came out of the Holy Place (for all the priests who were present had consecrated themselves, without regard to their divisions, <sup>12</sup>and all the Levitical singers, Asaph, Heman, and Jeduthun, their sons and kinsmen, arrayed in fine linen, with cymbals, harps, and lyres, stood east of the altar with 120 priests who were trumpeters; <sup>13</sup>and it was the duty of the trumpeters and singers to make themselves heard in unison in praise and thanksgiving to the Lord), and when the song was raised, with trumpets and cymbals and other musical instruments, in praise to the Lord, "For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever," the house, the house of the Lord, was filled with a cloud, <sup>14</sup>so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the house of God. **6:**<sup>18</sup>"But will God indeed dwell with man on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, how much less this house that I have built!"

Hans Peter grew up in an ordinary family. His parents were neither particularly rich nor particularly poor. Although there were occasional arguments, he generally enjoyed a harmonious upbringing and education. He went to university, got a good job, and started a family. Despite all this, Hans Peter always felt that something was missing. So, he began to search. He accepted an invitation from a friend to attend a church service and wanted to know everything about what happened there. His friend Lukas explained that through church services, we connect to God. Hans Peter sat in the back pew and observed everything closely. He didn't understand most of it and was quite amazed that all these people sitting there were doing exactly what they were doing because they wanted to be connected to God. According to his friend Lukas, they were bringing their lives before God. They gave thanks for the good times and confessed their mistakes and sins to this same God. Somehow, Hans Peter felt a strong desire to do the same and thought to himself: "I want to know how this works."

What preoccupied Hans Peter was the question: "How do I connect with God?" This is the fundamental question that all people ask themselves in various ways. We often have these conflicting feelings, like Hans Peter. On the one hand, "I want to be close to God! I want to tell him everything." But on the other hand, "Is that even possible? And why through these things that happen here in the church service? Why exactly this way and not another?"

In our sermon text today, these two feelings are vividly portrayed. God led the people of Israel through the desert with a cloud. The cloud expressed precisely this ambiguity: God could not be seen or felt directly because he was hidden in a cloud. And yet, the cloud was the visible proof that God was there. And the people of Israel followed this cloud. They followed even at times when their faith was weak or even completely gone. Meanwhile, generations came and went. Solomon finally succeeded in building a temple where God would dwell. The anticipation was all the greater now. What would happen on this day when the Ark of the Covenant, containing the Ten Commandments, was no longer kept outside somewhere, but brought into this temple? Would all barriers finally fall away, making an encounter with God possible? The cloud, representing God's presence, served both to separate God's holiness from mankind and to prove that God was there. This isn't so far removed from Hans Peter, who somehow seeks contact with God but can't quite recognize this God. Therefore, God remains hidden behind a cloud of unfamiliar songs and prayers. Paul Gerhardt expresses this feeling very well. In the hymn we just sang, he says: "Ah, I am far too little to praise his glory... The Lord alone is King, I a withered flower." King Solomon comes to the same conclusion when he asks, "Will God really dwell in a temple built by human hands?" Why did Solomon build the temple anyway? To put it another way: Why does Hans Peter go to church and listen to the hymns, the prayers, and the praise, even if he doesn't understand all of it? We could also ask: Why do you go to church services, even if you're not always on board the hymns, the sermon, or the liturgy, and would have maybe done things differently? Or why do you go to church services when your mind wanders so often that you can't really concentrate on prayer and praise?

Paul Gerhardt answers these questions by continuing his hymn: I am not worthy to sing your praise, and compared to the eternal God, I am but a withered flower, and yet, as Gerhardt says, "I belong to Zion, to His tent, to increase His praise." Paul Gerhardt encourages Hans Peter and all of us to praise God even when we cannot see or feel him. Cantate Sunday is specifically designed for praising God in precisely this way.

In the Old Testament example we read, exactly that happens. The people of Israel gathered in the temple for the very first time and sang, nonetheless. They discovered something astonishing: it was as if everyone was singing in unison, so that the many trumpets and the many singers resonated with one voice and one note. In doing so, they discovered singing—but not only singing, also prayer. And through all of this, God came into their midst. It was about much more than just finding the right note. What happened to the people of Israel back then, when they, despite all human obstacles, sang and prayed in times of weakness? Martin Luther once said, "He who sings, prays twice." And that is precisely the meaning of singing for the people of Israel then, as it is for us today. But how does one pray twice?

When I pray, I have a specific request that I present to God—a thought that moves me, perhaps a great need, and I want to call upon God for help. It could also be that I am simply very grateful for what God has done for me. When I sing, even more happens than when I pray. I sing with more than mere words—my entire body gets involved. I breathe more deeply, and the sound that comes from my mouth is more than a thought—it encompasses my entire body; my emotions are also involved.

Additionally, when I sing with other people, I must coordinate with them and be in agreement and harmony with them. This begins with determining which song and which melody. Then I must pay attention to the others. I can't just start singing however I want, but I have to listen to them. Without this focus on the group, everything gets mixed up. When I connect with another person and attune myself to them, my heart opens, and we experience fellowship, comfort, and strength.

When we look at singing in this way, it's a picture of the Christian life itself. In the Christian life, I also have to connect with others, find common ground, and pay attention to others—I can't make up the whole choir by myself. I have to come together with different people so that a wonderful melody emerges. We experience unity on one path together.

When the people of Israel sang before the Temple, it is said that they all sang as if with one voice. What a wonderful feeling when thousands of people find the right note together! But there was something else happening. The congregation of Israel wasn't just gathered to find common ground among themselves. The entire focus was directed toward the center. They gazed upon the Holy of Holies—the place where the Ten Commandments were kept, the place where God was. Then the trumpets sounded! It's important to understand that trumpets in ancient Israel weren't primarily musical instruments. They served to announce something or warn people of impending danger. They were used much like our church bells today, signaling the beginning of worship services. The trumpets before Solomon's Temple were able to proclaim where God could be found. They were like evangelists, shouting out: Look! Here is your God! The trumpets of the ancient people of Israel show us that our singing has a purpose. It's not just for our own comfort—it's directed toward God. And when the people sang, "He is good; His mercy endures forever," the place was filled with a cloud, and everyone knew: God Himself was now among them.

Then something astonishing and unexpected happened. The cloud, which signified God's presence, disrupted the congregation's liturgy so much that the priests could no longer perform their duties. Our sermon text summarizes it, "for the glory of the Lord filled the house of God."

Yes, this is what can happen when God enters our midst: He thoroughly disrupts us. He doesn't simply leave us as we are but changes us—and usually in a way quite different from what we imagined. When Jesus came into the world, it was the same. No one had expected that this Jesus was the Son of God. When they began to approach Him, no one understood that He had to die on the cross to free us from sin. And when He died, no one expected that He would rise from the dead. Everything that Jesus is and everything He did shows us that God is different from how we imagine Him.

Therefore, we can only exclaim with Solomon: "Will God dwell in a temple made by human hands?" Or, as Paul Gerhardt said: "Alas, I am far too little to praise His glory." Or, as Hans Peter did—hesitantly, from the very back of the congregation—a prayer and a hymn of praise, that finds the same tone as the Old Testament congregation and the New Testament congregation, resonating into our present day and changing lives. Amen.