

# *The Singing God*

He will rejoice over you with Singing

*-Zephaniah 3:17*

Martin Williams

## Introduction

Recently Roly has been working through a series on the miracles of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark. Well, we are going to take a break from that today, as it is a holiday weekend, and we will get back into that series next week. And so I have been thinking, "What can I do as a one off sermon for this weekend." Well, the inspiration for this morning's message comes from two recent events that I have really enjoyed in this church.

Two Sundays ago was "Singing Sunday." This was a special blessing to me because on the Sunday afternoon I was able to enjoy singing a number of much loved hymns that I had not had the opportunity to sing for a while. You see, my previous church in Auckland, North Shore Baptist Reformed, only sung hymns.

Then last Sunday night I had the privilege of listening Rodney McCann, our operatic leader of the Baptist Churches, sing in a concert to raise money for Baptist Youth Ministries in New Zealand. And that was just wonderful. And so I got to thinking, "Well, you know, God sings too!" So in order to carry the theme of "Singing Sunday" over to today I have entitled my sermon "The Singing God." I wonder if you have ever hear God sing? There are a group of people who spend their time listening for sounds in the cosmos. They are called S.E.T.I.

## S.E.T.I. The Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence

The Search for Extra-Terrestrial Intelligence (SETI) is a ten year, \$100 million dollar (that's US dollars) program sponsored by NASA and carried out at the SETI institute (a scientific organization founded in 1984 with about 100 scientists, educators, and the like working there) to answer once and for all the age-old question: "Is anyone else out there?" Their mission statement reads:

The **mission** of the SETI Institute is to explore, understand and explain the origin, nature and prevalence of life in the universe.

“The general approach of SETI projects is to survey the sky to detect the existence of transmissions from a civilization on a distant planet, an approach widely endorsed by the scientific community as hard science,” says one press release. I first read about SETI on the internet as I was trying to catch up on the latest news and discoveries made by astronomers (a small interest of mine – you will hear about another one of these later on).

By the way, if you want an aid to worship I encourage you to check out the website for the Hubble Space Telescope – one of my favorite websites – with its absolutely mind-blowing collection of photos: planets, stars, galaxies, and more (and you will see some of these up on the wall now). This is the material of worship. This is what **Psalm 19:1** is all about: **“The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.”**

Here the psalmist alerts us to the sounds of a celestial symphony whose music never ends. This is a heavenly gallery of the most unimaginably exquisite and breathtaking art. The focus of it all is the majesty of God himself as he displays for our enjoyment and his glory the beauty of his creative artistry.

What an antidote to modern humanity’s excessive preoccupation with self. The human soul, it seems, is now held captive by a fixation with its own states and conditions and concerns. The soul has become parasitic on itself, feeding on its own needs and cravings by excessive introspection and elaborate attempts to elevate its sense of self worth.

Your soul was never meant for this. You were designed for something better. You were built for the contemplation of something infinitely more wonderful, something incomparably more fascinating than your own “self.” You were created for the joyful contemplation of God.

Now, don’t get me wrong, I am not denouncing concern for our “souls” but only the misguided notion that “self” is the solution to its own problems. Our concern for the state and happiness and destiny of our “souls” is good, indeed God-given. And it is given by God precisely because he invites us to feast on his glory. The soul finds its greatest joy and most profound delight in the contemplation of God, not “self.” And that is what we are going to do today. So back to SETI.

As I mentioned, I first heard about SETI when I came across their website which contained a stunning collection of telescopic photographs of distant galaxies. According to their website, NASA hopes to place in distant space a satellite dish through which to listen to sounds of extraterrestrial life. You can even become involved yourself at your home computer if you download the SETI@home software package.

Anyway, if it were possible to eavesdrop on solar systems millions of light years away, would we hear anything? Is there sound in space?

Well, I believe there is one voice that would indeed be heard – if we had the right technology. Even now, in the farthest reaches of infinity, among the trillions and quadrillions and quintillions of stars yet unseen by human eyes, echoes forth the passionate voice of the Father, singing about his love for you and me.

Loudly and lively, God shouts with joy over his children. He fills the black holes with the light of his love and sings the stars to sleep with lullabies about *you*. It isn't extraterrestrial life forms that NASA or SETI would discover, but the glorious presence of life itself, singing in love for his people. **Zeph 3:17:**

**The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.**

Are you intrigued by the thought of God singing over you? Maybe your thinking: "Williams, you've really lost it this time. The infinite God of all glory out there singing love songs over me? Yeh right! My own parents didn't even do that for me, let alone God! God sighing, yes; God agonizing, probably; God throwing his arms up in the air in frustration, definitely; but God singing, no way!

"God couldn't possible love me like that. I'm too small, too insignificant. Why would the Creator of this vast universe of beauty and strength and splendor bother to think about me? I'm nothing. I've never done anything meaningful. I have no talent. Nobody will notice when I die. No one even notices me when I come into church.

"No one bothers to greet me or say hello, except maybe as a formality. I'm never invited out to lunch. No one ever asks my opinion. No one ever sits next to me unless it's the only seat left. So don't patronize me with pious pronouncements about God singing over me with love. Maybe he did over Mother Teresa, but no me."

Well, it's only natural (though still sinful) to conclude that if people treat me like that, God probably does too. If that's all I mean to them, it's doubtful I mean much to God either. Moreover, in our western tradition we struggle with this idea of God being passionately in love with his people for two other basic reasons:

(1) People in past generations often went to the opposite extreme. They tended to think of God as stern, demanding, cruel, even abusive. They so magnified God's wrath that they virtually ignored his love. Little more than a hundred years ago, nearly all evangelistic preaching portrayed God only as a fierce Judge whose fury burned against sinners. It is possible that some of the preaching in our generation is characterised by an equal imbalance in the opposite direction. Despite that there is still some difficulty in believing in a God that is passionately in love with his people.

(2) The second problem goes in a different direction. It teaches that God has no emotions. In fact chapter two of *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (1647), the confession of the Presbyterian church—incidentally one of my favourite confessions—says that God is, I quote, “without... passions.” In other words, God does not feel emotions. In fact I have heard a number of preachers (even recently) say that God's love is not something that God feels but something that God chooses to do (I personally think it is both). One author who I read recently argued that “[l]ove, according to the Scriptures, is not a...sensation of desire. Rather, it is a purposeful act of self-giving. The one who genuinely loves is deliberately devoted to the one loved. True love arises from the will—not from...emotion” (MacArthur, *The Love of God*, 26).

Now, I am sensitive to their concerns. They want to emphasize that God is not weak or changeable or subject to fickle feelings that are provoked by others. I have to agree with them on that point. But it simply won't do to relegate texts such as the following to simply “figures of speech”:

**Is not Ephraim my dear son, the child in whom I delight? Though I often speak against him, I still remember him. Therefore my heart yearns for him; I have great compassion for him," declares the LORD." (Jeremiah 31:20)**

**How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel?...My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused. I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor will I turn and devastate Ephraim. (Hosea 11:8-9)**

No one fully understands the nature of God's nature. But I do believe God feels. I believe that God has emotions, passions, affections. In particular he experiences delight and pleasure, dare I say *ecstasy*, over you and me. Is this not what our passage is about today (Zephaniah 3:17)?

**The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing. (Zeph 3:17)**

There is no way to tone down the language here. God not only loves you, now and forever, but that he is *delighted* to do so. He is *ecstatic* in his affection for you. His joy over you is almost too much for him to bear. He sings and shouts with uninhibited happiness...over you!

Now, if the thought of God experiencing “happiness” is a jolt to your religious sensitivities, consider what Jesus said in the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:21, 23):

**His master replied, “Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s [God’s] happiness!”**

Do you notice that. God is a happy God. The glory of heaven is wrapped up in our participation in the very joy that floods the heart of the Father. What our verse this morning (Zephaniah 3:17) is saying is that God is ecstatically happy in his love for his children. Elsewhere he says:

**“As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you.” (Isaiah 62:5)**

**“I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people.” (Isaiah 65:19)**

**“I will rejoice in doing them good...with all my heart and soul.” (Jeremiah 32:41).**

**“His pleasure is not in the strength of the horse, nor his delight in the legs of a man; the LORD delights in those who fear him, who put their hope in his unfailing love.” (Psalm 147:10-11)**

And our text this morning:

**The Lord your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.**

Can you imagine what it would be like to hear God singing? A mere spoken word from his mouth brought the universe into existence. What would happen if God lifted up his voice and not only spoke but sang! Perhaps a new heaven and a new earth would be created. Isaiah 65:17-19:

**“Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth....I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy. I will rejoice over Jerusalem and take delight in my people.**

What must God's voice sound like? Last week Joy and I were privileged to hear Rodney McCann, the leader of our Baptist churches and very accomplished opera singer, perform here at our church. There is something about a live concert that cannot be captured on CDs and television broadcasts, no matter how great the media quality. I wonder what God's voice sound like when he breaks forth in song? It makes you wonder: Is he a baritone or a bass or a tenor? Or is there some indefinable blending of each? Or must we presume that the singing God sounds anything remotely like singing humans? What must God's voice sound like? What do you hear when you envision God's singing? John Piper answered that question for himself when he wrote:

"I hear the booming of Niagara Falls mingled with the trickle of a mossy mountain stream. I hear the blast of Mount St. Helens mingled with a kitten's purr. I hear the power of an East Coast Hurricane and the barely audible puff of a night snow in the woods. And I hear the unimaginable roar of the sun, 865 thousand miles thick, 1,300,000 times bigger than the earth, and nothing but fire, 1,000,000 degrees centigrade on the cooler surface of the corona. But I hear this unimaginable roar mingled with the tender, warm crackling of logs in the living room on a cozy winter's night." (Piper, *Pleasures of God*, 180).

Aside from the *sound* of God's singing, *what* does he sing and *why*? That's easy. He sings of his love for you. Why? Because he loves you. For no other reason than he loves you. There is nothing worthy in you that could make him love you. Here's the crowning jewel of Zephaniah 3:17: God loves you with such emotion vitality that "he celebrates who you are with joyful singing!"

"Joyful singing" is the translation of one Hebrew word that appears several times in the Old Testament. The Hebrew word here literally means "a ringing cry," but should not be thought of an inarticulate shriek or scream. When the choir of Jehoshaphat belted out a "ringing cry" it also contained the following substantive declaration (2 Chron 20:21):

**"Give thanks to the LORD, for his love endures forever."**

Elsewhere God's people are exhorted to:

**"Tell of his works with songs of joy" (Psalm 107:22).**

In Isaiah 35:10 we read:

**"And the ransomed of the LORD will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away."**

If you are bothered by what seems to be irreverent rowdiness on the part of God, look closely at what comes next in the text. At times God's love often reduces him to silence, to quiet, contemplative affection, over his children. In our text this morning we read (Zephaniah 3:17, NASB):

**He will take great delight in you, he will be quiet in his love.**

Here we see a love that is so deeply felt, so profound, so perfect, that words are inadequate, indeed, unnecessary. To put it bluntly, God is speechless! The all-wise God, the "never-at-a-loss-for-words-God," the God with perfect insight into every situation, the God who always speaks correctly and with divine precision, is here moved to utter silence. Such is the impact of his love for you!

And no, his silence is not a reflection of *disinterest* but *enjoyment*. God is sincerely captivated in his affection for you, and words would only spoil the experience. God's passionate yearning for you can be both tumultuous and tranquil, celebrative and clam. One moment a party, the next silent and placid.

What imagery! What beauty!

I am stirred by the image of a mother tenderly embracing her young child, rocking gentle, softly caressing her forehead, an occasional light kiss on the cheek, without so much as a syllable to disturb the intimacy of her love for that child.

Such is God's love for you!

In his commentary on the book of Zephaniah Palmer Robertson comments:

To consider almighty God sinking in contemplations of love over a once-wretched human being can hardly be absorbed by the human mind." (Robertson, *Zephaniah*, 340).

I remember when our two older children were young, Jonathan and Sarah, and even now with our youngest, Hannah, Joy would quietly rock them to sleep each night. The gentle hush of a mother's passion for her children would then be broken with the sound of song—love songs for her little ones. She would sing to them in Korean and it would sound like this:

Han-na Ya, ohm-ma-nun, noh-rul, sang-rang-hae,  
Han-na Ya, ohm-ma-nun, noh-rul, sang-rang-hae,  
Sang-rang-hae, Sang-rang-hae, Sang-rang-hae,  
Na-nun, noh-rul, sang-rang-hae.

Precious Hannah, Mummy loves you,  
Precious Hannah, Mummy loves you,  
I love you, I love you, I love you,  
Mummy loves you so much.

This song would quieten the most distressed or grumpy child. Well, God too shatters the silence with his own songs of love and delight and joy. But what possibly could stir the almighty and infinite God of heaven and earth to sing? Not *what* by *who*—*you!* God's delight is over *you!* *You* make him glad. He is overjoyed with *you*. *You*, his child, the apple of his eye, the choicest among ten thousand.

My love for my three children is virtually inexpressible. I enjoy them. I relish their presence. I adore them. I cherish every word they speak (most of the time). I treasure their souls. I appreciate their efforts, even when they fail. I dote on them in public. I am devoted to their immediate and eternal welfare. I am passionately in love with all three of them. But God loves me more! God loves you more! Our love for our own children pales in comparison with the passion of the Father for his little ones. But I pause to ask this morning: "Can you *feel* the wonder of this today—that God is rejoicing over you with loud singing?"

### **Objection #1: "I am too guilty"**

Perhaps you are saying to yourself, "No, I can't, because I am too guilty. I am unworthy. My sin is too great, and the judgments of God against me on account of my sin are too many. God could never rejoice over me. Well, you are right. You are unworthy. Your sin is great. God's judgments against you are many. But consider, this morning, **Zephaniah 3:15**. God foresees your hesitancy. He understands. So the prophet says:

**"The Lord has taken away his judgments [some versions have "punishments"] against you."**

Can you not feel the wonder that the Lord exults over you with loud singing today, even though you have sinned, and sinned greatly? Can you not feel that the condemnation has been lifted because he punished his own Son in your place, if you will only believe?" This is the wonder of **Isaiah 53:5**:

**"But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed."**



Now consider the wonderful words of **Psalm 103:10-13**:

**“He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him.”**

How high are the heavens above the earth? A million miles? A billion? A trillion? A quadrillion? A quintillion? A sextillion? Try infinity? If you could quantify God’s love for you and me, that’s about as close as one could come to making sense of it. Even then the infinity of space is a paltry comparison to the incomprehensible extent of God’s incomparable love for you and me. None of this means that God approves of our sin – he does not – only that his love is much greater than our sin. Our weakness and wretchedness is in the end no barrier to his sovereign grace and love.

### **Objection #2: “I am Surrounded by Enemies”**

“No,” you say again, “I can’t, because I am surrounded by enemies. Obstacles press me in on every side. There are people at work who would make my life miserable if they knew I was a Christian. There are people in my family who would ostracize me. There are peers at my school who would poke fun at me. There are friends and family members who would do everything to drag me down. Satan my great enemy is doing everything in his power to discourage and dishearten and disillusion me. I could never go on believing. I would have too many enemies if I took my Christianity too seriously. The oppression and ostracism would be too much for me, I could never do it.”

Consider this morning **Zephaniah 3:17**:

**“The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save.”**

And **verse 19**:

**“At that time I will deal with all who oppressed you [says the Lord].”**

And **verse 15**:

**“The LORD...has cast out your enemies.”**

Can you feel the wonder that God is doing everything that needs to be done for you to enjoy his own enjoyment of you? Can you see that the enemies and oppressors are not too strong for God? Nothing can stop him, when he rejoices over you with loud singing? Nothing, absolutely nothing can separate you from his incomparable love (**Romans 8:35-39**):

**Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?...I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

Can you feel the wonder of it now? Do you feel the joy of being loved by a God like this? Can you believe that he rejoices over you?

### **Objection #3: “God Feels Too Far Away from Me”**

“No,” you say again, “I still can’t, because he is a great and holy God and I feel like he is far away from me. I am very small. I am nobody. The world is a huge place with many important people. There are major movements and institutions and churches and leaders that he is concerned with and happy about. God is like the prime minister. He is far away in Wellington, busy with big things.” Consider this morning **Zephaniah 3:15**:

**“The LORD, the King of Israel, is with you.”**

and **verse 17**:

**“The LORD your God is with you.”**

He is not far from you. Yes, I admit this staggers the imagination and stretches credibility to the breaking point—that God can be personally present to everyone who comes to him and believes on him. But say to yourself, again and again, He is God! He is God! What shall stop God from being close to me if he wants to be close to me? He is God! He is God! The very greatness that makes him seem too far to be near, is the greatness that enables him to do whatever he pleases, including being near to me and to you. Has he not said, for this very reason (**Isaiah 57:15**):

**“For this is what the high and lofty One says—he who lives forever, whose name is holy: ‘I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit.’”**

## **Objection #4: “I am Enslaved to Shame”**

But still you persist and say, “Look, you just don’t understand. I am the victim and the slave of shame. I have been endlessly belittled and put down by my parents. I have been scoffed at and threatened and manipulated and slandered and shamed. Inside this cocoon of shame even the singing of God sounds faint and far away and indecipherable. It is as though my shame has made me deaf to anyone’s happiness with me, especially God’s. I cannot feel it.” Well, I am sure you feel the way that you feel. I have not been through what you have been through. But God is no stranger to shame. Unbelievable shame was heaped upon his Son (Heb 12:2), terrible slander, repeated belittling, mocking, even from his own townsfolk (Matt 13:55-58), culminating in the most shameful of deaths, crucifixion (**Hebrews 12:2-3**):

**Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him *endured the cross, scorning its shame*, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.**

Therefore, says the writer to the Hebrews, “**we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses**” (**Hebrews 4:15**). For I know I have never walked in your shoes. I did not have to live with the family you live with. He feels it with you. And best of, listen this morning to what his Father says in **Zephaniah 3:19**:

**“At that time I will deal with all who oppressed you; I will rescue the lame and gather those who have been scattered. I will give them praise and honor in every land where they were put to shame.”**

Isn’t it amazing how well God knows you and me? Can you not feel the warmth of his heart as he makes provision for every question you have? Do you not hear the singing of God as you draw near?

## **A Massive Blank Spot Found in the Universe**

In an Associated Press release on Friday, August 24, 2007, astronomers reported the discovery of what is being called a “massive blank spot in the universe.” What’s got them scratching their heads is, I quote, “what’s just not there. The cosmic blank spot has no stray stars, no galaxies, no sucking black holes, not even mysterious dark matter. It is 1 billion light years across of nothing. That’s an expanse of nearly 6 billion trillion miles of emptiness, a University of Minnesota team announced Thursday.”

The press release continues: "Astronomers have known for many years that there are patches in the universe where nobody's home. In fact, one such place is practically a neighbor, a mere 2 million light years away." "It looks like something to be taken seriously," said Brent Tully, a University of Hawaii astronomer. Tully said, "astronomers may eventually find a few cosmic structures in the void, but it will still be nearly empty."

Retired NASA astronomer Steve Maran said of the discovery: "This is incredibly important for something where there is nothing to it." Talk about getting excited over nothing!

Well, I've got some even greater and more exciting news for these astronomers and scientists. There wrong! God's there! This "place in space" may lack for stars and black holes and galaxies and dark matter and other forms of matter but the only thing that ultimately matters is wholly and powerfully and personally present in all his glory: God.

He not only fills the universe he made, but transcends it. He is everywhere in it, through it, and beyond it. The most sophisticated scientific tools may not detect his presence or hear his voice, but he is there. Simply put: space it God! Not only that. Not only does God fill space with his presence, but he also fills it with his singing over you.

I may not be an astronomer, but I would like to bring a word of correction to these learned men. There is not such thing as a "void" or "blank spot" or an "empty" place in space. Our great and glorious Triune God, Father, Son and Spirit, fills the universe. *Though bereft of meteors and moons and matter, our majestic and all-powerful God is there, and everywhere, and he fills the universe with his songs of joy and delight and passion and affection for you. Can you hear him today. Listen carefully and you might.*