

“Praise”

Deut. 10:12-21; Romans 15:7-13;
Matthew 21:12-17; Psalm 150

August 24, 2014
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow
Pastor Norman Fowler

We have taken a trajectory through the Psalms this summer. Last week we looked at that iconic Psalm – at least I think of it that way – Psalm 23, thinking about the Lord as shepherd. As we’ve gone through the Psalms, we’ve come from the initial reminder that we can be planted along the streams of God’s word and grow. Then we went through some of the struggles and recognized how we can come to God honestly. That is, in fact, one of the wonderful things about the Psalms. As we hear them speak, we recognize that we, too, can come honestly to God with where we’re at, who we are. Even in the times when we are upset with God and want to tell God how things should go, we can come.

Through it, we find that God stays with us and, indeed, God is our shepherd; we shall not want. He has us lie down in green pastures and leads us beside still waters. He restores our soul and leads us on paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. Even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we shall fear no evil. After thinking about that and recognizing that we have such a God that then pursues us with goodness and mercy, we will live in the house of the Lord our whole life long, forever.

We come to the end of the Psalms and again find another time to lift our voices in praise. We hear Psalm 150 as it does that.

*Praise the Lord! Praise God in his sanctuary;
praise him in his mighty firmament!
Praise him for his mighty deeds;
praise him according to his surpassing greatness!*

As we move through life, as we recognize and encounter God again, when we truly notice God, it feels to me like praise is that thing that all of a sudden comes out, that happens – at least at its best, perhaps. Even when we come and just recognize our need to praise, recognize that God deserves our praise, praise works, I think, into our lives in particular ways. It invites us to lift our voices and instruments and sing. It’s really quite cacophonous, the way Psalm 150 describes it.

*Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp!
Praise him with tambourine and dance*

I should have handed out tambourines today and invited us all to get up and do something a little different—praise him with tambourine and dance.

*Praise him with strings and pipe!
Praise him with clanging cymbals; praise him with loud clashing cymbals!*

Sometimes we're so accustomed to thinking of God with reverence that I wonder if we don't miss that exuberance of Psalm 150. If I had a pair of cymbals to clang together, it would have been a great thing to have done today.

There's a way, in this exuberance, that praise gets our attention. I'm thinking about when we praise anybody, or the praise we ourselves need. There are times when we think about our need for praise and how praise helps us recognize that somebody is noticing us, caring about us. I don't think God necessarily needs our commendation like we praise each other, but it is important that in our praise we notice God and the wonder of who God is, the greatness of God, and that God is in our lives and in that, there is an exuberance that can come out. It is in those moments it helps us recognize the value of who God is.

I know for myself that I sometimes have a hard time paying attention, listening, when the thing I'm listening to doesn't strike me as the most important thing in my life at the moment. I sometimes struggle to remember things that I don't see as valuable. It doesn't mean I'm always right about that. In fact, that's one of the wonderful things about praise. It reminds me of what is truly valuable; God is valuable and I really can listen. I can pay attention to God because God truly is valuable.

Indeed, it's interesting that the word *praise* in the Old Testament is sometimes translated as "to shine." So one thing praise does is, it directs our attention. It can shine on something and help us notice it. When we shine a light on something, we notice it. It focuses our attention. There's a way in which praise does that for us. It refocuses our attention on the one we think is important, the author of our exuberance. When we praise God, we refocus on the author of life. We lift our voices. We remember who God is. There is in that praise both a sense of thankfulness and a sense of celebration, and we are invited to

Let everything that breathes praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!

The Psalms start with an encouragement to know that the word of God flows like a mighty stream among us and that we can grow from it, and they end with praise. I think it invites our lives to be like that, to be like the Psalms. We will go through a lot of things in life, but God will walk with us through the valley of the shadow of death. We need not fear evil for God is with us and we can come out knowing that God pursues us with goodness and mercy and we get to live in the house of the Lord forever and we can lift our voices in praise.

Sometimes we think of praise and worship as the same thing. I tend not to think of them as the same thing. I think of praise as only a part of worship, but there is a way that it goes all the way through. As we think of praise as something that focuses us on God, that helps remind us, helps us celebrate God, it is what worship is about.

There are a couple of elements of worship I don't often think of as praise. We have the time of confession when I think about my own struggles, but it's followed immediately by

the grace of God. Then we lift our voices again in thanksgiving and praise. Having praised and wondered about who God is and the greatness of God at the beginning, talked about our struggles, and received God's grace, we take time then to listen to God's word and to know that the one we praise, the one who is incredibly valuable, the one who is really the author of all that is, is worth listening to. So in worship, praise prepares our hearts to hear God's word again. Sometimes it encourages us to let Jesus come into our sanctuary again and drive out that which would keep us from worshiping God. What market forces are in my heart that I might need to let go of? What den of robbers is there? How can I allow him to sweep it clean? I can do that partly by remembering through praise the wonder and grace of God, and allowing myself to be open again to the work of God in Jesus Christ.

It is as we enter in praise, as we allow praise to shape our lives so that we think about who God is and the value and wonder of our God, that we allow God to sweep into and through our lives and perhaps sweep out the things that get in the way. It allows us, then, to do the things we hear in places like Deuteronomy, where it says

*Fear the Lord your God; walk in all his ways, love him, serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and keep the commandments of the Lord your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, **for your own well-being.***

It's interesting that it ends with that phrase "for your own well-being." There's this wonder in me that as we think about God and praise God, the greatness of who God is, that refocuses us and lets us think about the value of God and what God says to us. God says, "And it's for your own well-being." There's something incredible about that to me. It's not just about coming and bowing down before the King; the King wants us to have well-being.

¹³May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

This is how Paul ends the passage from Romans that we read this morning. And when the God of hope enters our lives, our lives, too, can conclude with praise just as the psalms do.

Praise God! Let everything that breathes praise God! Amen.

Let's pray:

Lord, sometimes it is hard to remember how great you are. Our lives have their own struggles. In the midst of worrying about ones we love or hopes we don't see being accomplished, help us recognize that you are still the one who holds us. You walk with us even in the valley of the shadow of death. You set a table before us in the presence of our enemies. You lead us in paths of righteousness for your name's sake. Your goodness and mercy pursue us all the days of our lives. There is no other like you. Thank you. May all praise and glory be yours. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.