

“Reading the Psalms: Praise”

Psalm 150

June 27, 2021

Erma Bombeck had a gift for relating universal themes in particular stories. In one of her columns, Bombeck captured a heart-wrenching scene: “In church the other Sunday I was intent on a small child who was turning around smiling at everyone. He wasn’t gurgling, spitting, humming, kicking, tearing the hymnals, or rummaging through his mother’s handbag. He was just smiling. Finally, his mother jerked him about and, in a [loud] whisper...said, ‘Stop that grinning! You’re in church!’ As the tears rolled down his cheeks, she added, ‘That’s better,’ and returned to her prayers.”

Bombeck continued her reflection, “Suddenly I was angry. It occurred to me that the entire world is in tears, and if you’re not, then you’d better get with it. I wanted to grab this child with the tear-stained face close to me and tell him about my God - the smiling God, the God who had to have a sense of humor to have created the likes of us . . . Here I was sitting next to the only light left in our civilization - the only hope, our only miracle, our only promise of infinity. If he couldn’t smile in church, where was there left to go?”¹

I’m grateful that Second Presbyterian Church is a place where the God of joy is worshipped, smiles are encouraged, and the vocal participation of children is a sign of hope for the future. Still, I imagine most of us can relate to Bombeck’s story and that some have witnessed similar scenes...even here. Indeed there can be, in the Christian church, an assumption that reverence is a synonym for gloominess, that being serious about God means being dour in worship. I find this peculiar given the broad range of scripture that urges and commands people of faith to radiate a spirit of joy, to sing and dance, to praise God with enthusiasm.

Nowhere is this theme more apparent than in the Psalms. Woven through this book of communal poetry and congregational hymnody, we find a passion for praise. Psalm 150 is a prime example of these exuberant and joyful psalms of praise. One of you wrote me this week wondering how I would stretch six short verses to a twenty-minute sermon. I took it as a challenge—so here goes! This brief Psalm insists that the only proper human response to the greatness and grace of God is unrestrained, ubiquitous, unending praise. Let everything that breathes praise the Lord. Let the praise never stop.

We all agree that praising God is a part of what it means to be a community of faith. You have all chosen to participate in a worship service on this Sunday morning. I think it’s fair to assume that at least part of what led you to that decision was a desire to praise God. But it also occurs to me that there may be some discomfort with praise among us today. Not the view that praising God is undignified, but perhaps some skepticism of its purpose. After all, efficiency and productivity are fundamental values among us. Competition for our time, even this one hour of weekly worship, is fierce. So, you might be asking yourself the question: what does praise **do**? Is the potential *return* worth the *investment* of time? More to the point...is praise productive?

The Psalms respond to these questions in a variety of ways. The first is that praise is our purpose—the ultimate vocation of the human community. It was St. Augustine who famously prayed, “You have created us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” We were made for praise. Worship of God is how we find home in the midst of lives that can feel adrift and aimless. The rhythm of weekly worship allows us to regularly return to

the source of our life and to reconnect with the deep purpose of life.

Yesterday, I returned from a week in one of God's thin places of sacred encounter for me: Montreat in the mountains of western North Carolina. Montreat is a place where praise of God is as natural as breathing, surrounded by the beauty of those ancient mountains, joined with others seeking a place of rest and restoration, tuned to the transcendent in tangible ways. I haven't missed a summer trip to Montreat since I was a rising freshman in high school twenty-five years ago. I keep going back because my soul knows I need to be there. That is precisely the point of praise and of Augustine's prayer. We need to praise God because we were created for this practice. If we are true to who we are, we can't stay away from the rhythm of praise and worship.

But praise is not only a God-given responsibility for people of faith. It is also a reliable source of joy. Another purpose of praise is the experience of delight. I wonder, how many of us spend enough time doing something purely for the joy of it? The beauty of our praise of God is that it does not need to have specific measurable attainable realistic or time-bound goals. In fact, we can come to worship to be freed from the expectations and ambitions that often occupy our time. If we spend most of our time caring for others, praise invites us to let God care for us. If we are hurting or have caused hurt, worship can bring reconciliation and healing. If we come loaded down with grief or sadness, praise gives us space and a break. Just for the joy of it—this is one of the reasons why we praise God.

Since early May, I have had a similar experience every single Sunday morning that I have been here at Second Presbyterian Church. Thanks to our summer schedule, I have a few moments before worship, and try to make my way to the sidewalk outside the sanctuary doors. And each Sunday, at least one worshipper has walked up to me and said, "This is my first Sunday back...it feels so good to be here." Many have had tears in their eyes. And each time

it has occurred to me that, if we pay attention, our souls are telling us what they need—what we need. Not another task or obligation. Not more stuff. We need this time. We need to worship. We need to center ourselves in the presence of God. We need to lift hearts and voices in praise of God.

Speaking of joy, and voices, and sanctuaries, Psalm 150 underscores what we have learned again in a time of pandemic—the power and sacred beauty of music. We've experienced it in unique ways since the shutdown fifteen months ago—the clash of cymbals in the form of banging pots and pans to thank healthcare workers; the sound of trumpet became car horns celebrating birthdays and graduations; the beauty of sacred song mediated through screens and over the airwaves. Yes, we've adapted and shifted and found creative solutions. But we've also discovered, as Dr. Louer wrote two weeks ago, that nothing compares to the real thing, in real time, in a real space, with real people. Praise gathers us in community and gifts us with a song. How many children, parents, and teachers still have the Vacation Bible School songs ringing in their heads, or being sung from the backseats of their cars? Each summer, I remember those great camp songs and am transported to the open fields of Camp Grier. (SING: "I am a C...I am a CH...I am a CHRISTIAN). Music moves us. Hymns of praise unite the stories of our faith with our own lives. We feel the presence of joy in a unique way. I hope and pray that there are such moments in worship for each of you, when you can release what holds you back and simply rejoice in the presence of God.

Finally, and here we come to the ROI of praise, the practice of praising God transforms us. The purpose of worship is to remake the world in the image of God's kingdom and to rehearse for the life in that kingdom. When we worship, when we offer praise to God, when our hearts are open to God's grace, everything is different. The Psalms of praise contain within them a contagious spirit wholly unaffected by the circumstances that surround it. In other words, we worship God because our worship is

itself a glimpse of the truth we proclaim. I have seen it happen so many times as I have stood beside and walked with fellow travelers in faith who are in the midst of the most difficult situations life can send our way. I have seen communal worship transform pain into praise and trust in the promises of God. Praise is not a magic elixir or a quick fix. It is a practice through which God transforms us.

I am thinking this morning about my dear friend Rev. Gad Mpoyo and his congregation, Shalom International Ministry, in Clarkston, Georgia. Most members of this new worshipping community of the Presbyterian Church USA are refugees from countries around the world who have fled violent and oppressive regimes or devastating poverty, whose lives have been characterized by uncertainty and insecurity, whose journey to this country often means separation from loved ones and struggling to make ends meet. On Sunday evenings at 6:30, in a beautiful chapel in Clarkston, all of that fades away. In that place, at that time, praise of God is all that exists. There is no reason for fear and no cause for conflict. The world is transformed by the praise of God, and when I worship with this community of faith I am transformed by a vision of shalom, of peace and wholeness and vitality for all of God's children. It is, I believe, a foretaste of the heavenly banquet; a sign of the world to come.

I do understand that such a pronouncement might be met with puzzlement. After all, we who praise God on Sunday morning still have to go to work on Monday. Praise does not solve the world's problems or exempt the faithful from suffering. With so many wrongs to right and so much injustice to remedy, who has time for praise? Stop that grinning... you're in church!

What if I told you that the pathway to peace begins in praise? What if I told you that the practice of praise is built in to the human creature, a ready antidote to life's inevitable trials? What if I told

you that the only way to sustain a life of faith is to surrender yourself in praise of God? The only way.

Well then...let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Amen.

¹ Quoted in Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?* Zondervan Press, 1997. p. 32.