

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, June 18, 2023

Psalm 150

Friends, if you're joining us for the first time this summer or, actually, if you didn't join us last week, then you don't know that we are moving through a sermon series this summer. We're calling it Psalms of Summertime, and we are spending the summer moving through the different kinds of Psalms. For us the Psalms are really the center of our sacred text, but they are something that we don't often spend a whole lot of time studying. We will read them and we might even sing them, but we don't spend time exegeting them together. We certainly often don't preach from them. And so we are going to spend this entire summer doing...doing just that; and, hopefully, as we do, we'll be deepening our knowledge of scripture together. So in a moment I will read from Psalm 150. Last week we began with Psalm 1, the first Psalm, and this week we move toward the final Psalm, Psalm 150. In a moment I'll read from that, but before we do, let us go to God In prayer.

Good and gracious Spirit, as you moved over the waters of creation, we pray that you would move once again here, move amongst us, move within us, quiet within us any voice but your own that we might hear the word that you have for us to hear today, that as we hear we might be called to lead lives of response. So, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, God, our Rock and Our Redeemer. Amen.

Psalm 150

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!
Praise him with trumpet sound;
praise him with lute and harp!
Praise him with tambourine and dance;
praise him with strings and pipe!
Praise him with clanging cymbals;
praise him with loud clashing cymbals!
Let everything that breathes praise the LORD!
Praise the LORD!

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen.

So this for us is the prototype of what a Psalm of Praise looks like. This is one of the different types of Psalms that is presented across these 150 of them. We will move through each different type throughout the summer, but for us this day we are centered on praise. To praise then is to share admiration for something or someone outside of oneself. For us, as people who follow in the way of Christ, our praise is focused in a particular direction—that is, the direction of God. It is

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an acknowledgment for us of our admiration for who and what God is for each of us, but also for the world, the acknowledgment of the way in which we admire God's love and grace, God's hope and God's power. Praise for us as followers of the way is an acknowledgment that there is a power outside of ourselves that is beyond our power. Thanks be to God.

Praise, it turns out, is actually built into who we are. Maybe some of you had to memorize the Shorter Catechism at your confirmation; and if you did, then you probably remember the first question, as aged as it is, "What is the chief end of man" or the chief end of humanity? It's the first question in the Shorter Catechism, also the larger catechism as well, and the answer is thus, "To glorify God and enjoy God forever." Our chief end the Creed tells us is to glorify God and enjoy God forever. Praise then is built into who we are. Praise is what we were made for.

And yet sometimes we can forget that. We can think that we come to this place for some other purpose than to simply adore and give thanks to God.

A friend of mine reminded me of the author John Updike this week, who puts it this way, "Ancient religion and modern science agree that we are here to give praise or to slightly tip the expression to pay attention. Without us the physicists who have espoused the principles of the universe, they tell us that the Universe would go unwitnessed. Without us and in a real sense that it would not be here at all. The universe exists incredibly for us. What we beyond doubt do have is our instinctive intellectual curiosity about the universe, our wonder at its existence itself, and an occasional surge of sheer blind gratitude for being here."

I was reading that this week. That phrase "surge of sheer blind gratitude" captured me. Gratitude for just being here, for just having been created to witness this.

A couple of weeks ago, Trinity Sunday in fact, I took a trip for a buddy's 40th birthday party. It's actually not till July, but he wanted to celebrate a little bit early because a couple of our favorite artists were performing in a music event, I would say, Festival, if you will, in Lexington, Kentucky; and it was an all-day affair, and it was about 95 degrees. And we had gotten out there pretty early and we had stayed to the last headliner was to make their appearance, and it was still warm, but the sun had gone down, and it was about 9: 30 or 10 o'clock.

And Zach Bryan was on the stage. He's a folksy, country guy. Hopefully, if you're...if that's a genre that appeals to you, I hope you know who he is; and if you don't, go home and check him out on your Spotify or your favorite streaming platform. Zach Bryan's a pretty incredible artist, but what had happened was the sun had gone down but there was still a glow, and it was late and we had all been out there a long time and he had played his tail off.

And then he started the first chords of a song called Revival. You all don't know it, but it's a good one. And on the CD of his—or on his album I should say... the CD that aged me really quickly, didn't it? On the album it is a three minute and like 15 second song, right, and he starts into it, and he starts talking about having an all-night Revival. Someone grabbed the women,

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someone steal the Bibles. I don't know where he's stealing the Bibles from, but that's what's happening. Talks about being baptized, um, and then playing Johnny Cash on vinyl all night long; and he gets done with a three-minute version of it, and we're all kind of standing in awe, and all of us are singing. We know, we can kind of tell, this is like going to be the last song. Have you ever been to a concert where you can feel that it's winding down? You could feel this coming to an end, and you don't really want it to come to an end. And after that first three minutes, then he introduces the banjo player and he tells us he's from such and such place somewhere far away from Lexington, Kentucky, and they let some riff on the banjo. And then we go back to the chorus and about 60 000 people in a big old field—actually a dog track—begin to sing the chorus together. Okay? We don't want it to end, that he can tell, and so then he turns to the guitar player and he says, “This is the guitar player; he's from such and such place really far away from Lexington, Kentucky, and he lets him riff for a while too; and then he turns to the organist. We got this beautiful pedal organ there on the stage, and he just goes crazy on that thing. And all of a sudden we're 10 minutes into this song, and we're singing, 60,000 people singing about a Revival that's going to happen. Over and over and over again, and about the tenth person in this band that he's introducing is beginning to riff on their different instrument, I just kind of stopped singing, and I stand there and I look behind me, and there's pretty close to the stage so there's like 60 or we'll say 50 000 people behind me on this dog park, right?

And the moon has come up straight behind us, but the sun is still kind of visible there, just the ...the last light of it.

A surge of sheer, blind gratitude kind of falls over me.

Maybe you've had one of those moments.

Maybe it's been and you've been sitting in a...a rocking chair with a baby, with a newborn, and it's early in the morning, and they won't go back to sleep unless they're in your arms. This moment of sheer blind gratitude falls over you.

Or maybe it's like it was last year when I watched Tom and Melissa Grimes sitting right where Barbara is this morning, as their daughter sang a solo here. And as she got done with the solo and every one of us kind of sat in awe of the sound of her voice, Melissa turns to Tom and she puts her fist out, and he turns to her and they fist bump. Sheer blind gratitude falls on you.

Maybe you can put yourself in that place right now.

I'm not quite sure how to describe praise of God beyond that nearest approximation, where we find ourselves in a place of being overwhelmed by the goodness of this life, by the goodness of all that we get to experience. A surge of sheer blind gratitude just for being here.

Maybe you've sat as the chancel choir has sung a beautiful offertory or anthem, and it's fallen over you even in the pew where you're sitting this morning. Sheer blind gratitude.

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And I love that phrase. But there's a reason also why the psalmist puts Psalm 150 at the end of the Psalter. Last week Psalm 1 challenged us to spend time in God's word reflecting and studying together so that we might be like trees planted by a stream, that when the harsh weather comes our leaves will not wither or fade or fall away, but we will remain strong. The psalmist gives us that encouragement because the psalmist knows that life is going to be difficult to navigate.

The rest of the psalter is filled with lament and pain, also joy and thanksgiving. It's filled with all of the things that make up this life—grief that you might be feeling this morning but also joy. Psalm 150 comes at the end of the collection because praise needs to be positioned purposefully. Praise does not come in spite of lament or hardship; it comes...it comes even through it.

It comes because, praise does. it comes because we have lived the difficulty but also the beauty of this life, and there will be moments when we just get overwhelmed with the beauty of it all.

I love New Orleans. Maybe some of y'all do too. I know during breaks like this—probably not during the summer. We're not making New Orleans a...a place to travel to then, but in the early spring a couple folks took a train down there for spring break, and they got to experience the beauty of that town in the spring. Hopefully, you've spent some time down there. And there's this... there's this tradition down there, and we actually share some of it here—the idea of a jazz funeral, you all know it, right? Yeah.

There's this first line that comes. Here's how things get situated in a jazz funeral. We have a first line that comes, and they're making their way down the street, and they're singing and they're playing musical instruments. We might even say there's some tambourines and some dance, some strings and some clanging cymbals. They are making their way down the street in procession to remember a loved one who has died. These are professionals that make their way. They lead the parade, but then something follows them. It's the second line. They follow the band, the professionals. They follow with music and with dance. They engage the crowd that has gathered to watch the parade.

It's the second line that reminds us that praise comes even in the midst of difficulty, that it is okay to be thankful and to celebrate even in the most dire of situations. There are no dirges for the second line. No. There is simply dancing and celebrating and sheer gratitude for the life of the one who has passed.

When I hear the words of the psalmist talk about all these beautiful instruments that have to be used to praise God, I can't help but think about that second line. I can't help but perhaps see each of us—the Church of Jesus Christ—as that second line, as those who are called out into the streets to dance and to celebrate, to clang cymbals, to shake a tambourine, and maybe shake a leg, to...to take a deep breath to remind us that we are still alive and that what we are experiencing is worthy of deep and abiding gratitude.

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“Praise the Lord,” the psalmist says. “Praise God in his Sanctuary; praise him in his mighty firmament; praise him for his mighty deeds. Praise him according to his surpassing greatness. Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp; praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipes; praise him with clanging cymbals; praise him with loud clashing cymbals. Let everything that breathes praise the Lord. Praise the Lord.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.