

# IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Reverend Mary Newberg Gale  
Sunday, June 25, 2023

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## Psalm 145

Our Psalm for this morning is Psalm 145 as we continue our journey through the Psalms of Summertime. I will admit it was difficult to narrow down a psalm for this week as the theme is hymns, Psalms as hymns, because 95 of the psalms in our psalter are hymns, so that's a lot of psalms to go through to determine which one I felt God speaking to us about today. And as Anna shared with the children, it is also a Psalm of Praise, because 95 percent of the psalms in our Psalter are also at least part words of praise to God the Creator. In particular, Psalm 145 is an ode to the God who created all. I invite us to hear what God is saying to us this day.

I will extol you, my God and King,  
and bless your name for ever and ever.  
Every day I will bless you,  
and praise your name for ever and ever.  
Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised;  
God's greatness is unsearchable.  
One generation shall laud your works to another,  
and shall declare your mighty acts.  
On the glorious splendor of your majesty,  
and on your wondrous works, I will meditate.  
The might of your awesome deeds shall be proclaimed,  
and I will declare your greatness.  
They shall celebrate the fame of your abundant goodness,  
and shall sing aloud of your righteousness.  
The LORD is gracious and merciful,  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.  
The LORD is good to all,  
and his compassion is over all that he has made.  
All your works shall give thanks to you, O LORD,  
and all your faithful shall bless you.  
They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom,  
and tell of your power,  
to make known to all people your mighty deeds,  
and the glorious splendor of your kingdom.  
Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,  
and your dominion endures throughout all generations.  
The LORD is faithful in all his words,  
and gracious in all his deeds.  
The LORD upholds all who are falling,  
and raises up all who are bowed down.  
The eyes of all look to you,  
and you give them their food in due season.

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You open your hand,  
satisfying the desire of every living thing.  
The LORD is just in all his ways,  
and kind in all his doings.  
The LORD is near to all who call on him,  
to all who call on him in truth.  
God fulfills the desire of all who fear him;  
God also hears their cry, and saves them.  
The LORD watches over all who love him,  
but all the wicked God will destroy.  
My mouth will speak the praise of the LORD,  
and all flesh will bless his holy name for ever and ever.

Friends, these are the words of Our Lord. Thanks be to God.

Now I grew up in a musical family. Whether we were singing, there was always music somewhere: on the radio, my father was whistling or singing, everywhere we were there was a variety of music. It went from hymns in the old red Presbyterian Hymnal all the way to like Led Zeppelin and Green Day and anything in between. There was always music around. One of my favorite parts and memories of church is sitting in one of the front pews. My home church is built in the semicircle, so we sat up front, and the four of us would be singing in four-part harmony through the whole service; and even hearing those hymns today brings me kind of right back to those moments, because music transports us. I hear Crown Him With Many Crowns, and I remember sitting with my grandmother in that pew, and I remember sitting in that same pew at her funeral in that same church. Music transports us to happy and sad. It takes us to places, it helps our brain go to places that we might not get to otherwise. And, trust me, you don't have to be good at music or have musical talent in order for music to move you that way. As the Psalms say, Sing A Joyful Noise to the Lord. No one said it had to sound good, just that it needs to be joyful. Music is so powerful for us, I think, because it does use multiple intelligences. When we sing we are thinking, we are using our body in ways that we don't when we simply read. And so those songs, those hymns, the songs we sang in the car with our best friends when we were teenagers or with our parents on long car trips, those settle into our bones and become part of who we are. Music aids our memory, and it informs our theology. Saint Augustine said that when you sing, you pray twice; and I find that to be deeply, deeply true, because the hymns that we love have more of an impact on our faith than any sermon anybody can ever preach. Because we hear a sermon once, maybe twice in modern times if we're deeply moved and we go back and watch the live stream; but how many times have you sung a hymn, a favorite hymn of yours? This is also why, to the consternation of congregations all over the United States, we sing new hymns. Because we sing, we want to make our theology, our sung theology, have a breadth and a depth that matches our thought theology. Now the book of Psalms is very truly the hymn book of our faith, and it was the hymn book of the faith of the Israelites as well. There are hymns inside

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the book of Psalms that were sung in worship in the same way that we sing Holy Holy Holy or O Come All Ye Faithful every year, songs that mark the worship experience. There are songs and hymns in the Book of Psalms that are the songs that you sing in the home like the table blessings that you might sing; and every time I thought about this week, I was reminded of camp, Fiona just came back from Heartland Camp last week, and the number of songs that we teach our children around tables, our hymn book. Our psalms have that same joyfulness of children singing grace to the Superman theme, you know, “Thank God for giving us food, thank you God for giving us food, for the food we eat and the friends we meet, we thank God for giving us food.” We have that like our hymn, our Psalms have that joy too. They have the “regalness” of Holy, Holy, Holy and the joy of the Superman song or the Johnny Appleseed song. The songs that we sing, like the songs we teach our children, help us to learn. Like I can, on beck and call, sing the entirety of all of the books in the Bible because someone taught me a song when I was 10 years old to memorize them. I am not going to do that right now. But in the same way that we teach our children to sing the ABCs, when we're singing it helps with our memory, and it engages us.

Psalms 145 is an acrostic poem. That means that each line, each verse of the psalm starts with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet—21 verses, 21 letters, and it is used and designed to be that way to help with memorization in the same way that we teach our children the ABCs and many many other songs that we teach them. Psalm 145 is a comprehensive reflection of God's faithfulness and compassion for all of creation. It is literally comprehensive because it goes from A to Z or Alef to Tav as the case may be in Hebrew, but it is also temporally comprehensive. It moves from individual praise to group thanks to generational thanks to continued generational thanks. The writer of the psalm is trying to encompass all and the complexity of all of the comprehensive reflection of God's goodness for us. All things, all times, all letters of the alphabet are devoted to celebrating and praising God. It's a joyful and confident song of gratefulness for the creator of all good things.

Verses one through seven are setting the table for the psalm, like who will be praising God, and as I just said it moves from individual praise to group praise. You, me, everyone, all nations, all things respond to God's action in their lives, but the psalm centers around verse 8. Verses 8 and 9 provide the central thrust and theme of the entire psalm. Verse 8 says the Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The Lord is good to all, and God's compassion is over all God has made. The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. That is possibly the oldest theological assertion in our entire scriptures. We first see it in Exodus when Moses, after coming down the mountain with the tablets, sees the people misbehaving with the golden calf and throws the tablets down and yells at them all. And then Moses has to go back up to God and explain what has happened. In that second appearance before God, Moses describes God— God describes God's self to Moses as slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. This is the time when Moses gets to see a glimpse of God's robe, as God hands the next set of tablets to Moses and encourages Moses down the mountain to lead with grace and mercy and steadfast love. Like the literal term Yahweh where at the burning bush God says to Moses “I am who I am,” this phrase, “the Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love,” tells us something important about

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God. God does not match energy. God does not meet us with what we bring to God. That is a blessing to us. If you'll notice when you're spending time in your scriptures, there are times throughout the Bible, but particularly in the Psalms, that you'll see the term the Lord and sometimes it's just capital L all lower case letters, but most often those letters are all capitalized. Now they may be small caps, which makes it hard for my older eyes to see it all the time—I've got to bring the Bible up close—but when you're looking at your scripture, and it says the LORD in all caps, that's God's name, like it's the personal name of God. They're not saying our God or some God, they are saying my God. In the same way if you were talking about Courtney, because the difference was between saying my pastor, my leader, and Courtney. There is power in using God's name, because the statement of faith “the Lord is gracious and merciful,” it's not a statement of faith that happens up here. It's not one that someone has sat down and clinically thought about all the different experiences that we see in the scriptures of God and created a, you know, reformed systematic theology about God. That statement, “The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love,” is a lived, experienced theology. It is personal, a personal experience of God's covenant faithfulness. This is who we know God to be—abounding in steadfast love for us and for all of creation. In Hebrew that word is Hesed, steadfast love, and the rest of this Psalm is a reflection on how that steadfast love is experienced in creation.

There's some language about God as King in this psalm. We'll see that frequently as we go through the Psalms, and I know many pastors, theologians, and teachers deliberately shy away from that language. They talk about God's kin-dom or God's community, and I think, at least in this case, it's important that the psalmist used the language Kingdom, because the psalmist is deliberately contrasting God as leader with the way the world understands leadership. The psalm uses the words Kingdom three times, power twice, glory twice to deliberately describe an alternative vision than the way the world understands a king or power or glory. It's a vision that doesn't use those things the way the world would. We see this explicitly in the second half of the psalm, because we talk about God being merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. We talk about God's power and might and glory, and then immediately God's attentiveness is turned to creation, especially the poor and the needy. That's the language of the psalm itself. God's power, God's might are mobilized to care for those who are otherwise uncared for. God's Kingdom, God's vision is turned to everyone and everything, everywhere, all the time, but in particular with those who are suffering.

Now, if it is true that the words that we sing tell us what we believe, if we indeed pray twice each time we sing, what did this song tell the ancient Hebrews about God and what does it tell us about God today? This psalm tells us in one instance that we and all of creation, we cannot keep our celebration of God to ourselves. In the first eight verses alone, the psalmist uses the terms extol, praise, law, declare, celebrate, and proclaim. There is no room in this example of faith for a quiet personal faith. This is a faith that shouts to the mountaintops the awesome glory and mercy and majesty of our God. It's a faith to be shared.

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This song, this hymn tells us that God does not respond to creation according to our actions, but rather according to God's mercy, graciousness, and steadfast love; and that right there is the good news of the Gospel, my friends— that we don't get what we deserve. Instead we get God's steadfast love, grace, and mercy. And if that hesed

is for us, it is also for everyone and everything; and that is incredibly powerful and very very frustrating. We like a world where people get what they deserve. It brings us some comfort.

But that's not the world that God lives in, that's not the world God has created us to live in. God's love and cares have no boundaries, no prerequisite, no requirements. All—the psalm uses the word all 16 times to refer to God's care for all of creation. God doesn't love or lead or reign as the world understands, as we understand. So maybe one thing this hymn teaches us is that we might need to be rethinking how we understand and live those things in our daily lives; and if God's kingdom, power, and might are turned to those who are suffering, where should our attention be?

The philosopher and theologian Nicholas Wolterstorff, I am sure I pronounced that wrong, I apologize to Nicholas. Nicholas Wolterstorff coined the phrase “the Christian theological thought of the each and every principle,” that the God of all creation is concerned with each and every living being. That is an expansive faith and a particular faith. Each and every—and if God cares for each and every, so should we. We are called to be both expansive and particular in our faith.

Some of the beauty of the hymn of Psalm 145 is that it boils down simply—what is true in the beginning of that hymn is true at the end. God is faithful and just and can be counted on. God can be counted on in the expansive and in the particular. God's grace and justice can be counted on in the expansive and in the particular.

And those are powerful words and at times hard to live.

But like every song and every hymn that we sing, sometimes we say the words until they have meaning for us. So it is my hope that if you are not in a place where you can see God having that love of each and every bit of creation and know that that is for you and for the world, that you can hear this song again and again and again until you can be moved into that place—even for a moment—of trust on God's reliability, God's love, and God's mercy and justice for us all. Amen.