

Season after Pentecost
Psalms of Praise: 113
June 7, 2015
Haven Lutheran Church
Readings: Luke 15: 8-10; Psalm 113

Grace to you and peace from our Triune God — Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Amen

The preacher at a little Pentecostal-style church was having a hard time getting any responses from the congregation. Here he was preaching on praise and worship and no one had even uttered a single “Amen!” He pushed on, elaborating on the well-known verse from Psalm 150, “Let everything that hath breath praise the LORD!” Still nothing. He tried again, unaware of the blooper that succeeded in getting everyone’s attention — “let everything that hath breasts praise the Lord!” “Preach it!” every adolescent boy in the congregation shouted!

Psalm 113 offers a similar, though less risqué, command: “Praise the LORD! Praise, O servants of the LORD; praise the name of the LORD.” Psalm 113 is the first of a collection of six consecutive psalms known as “Hallel” - “Praise” songs that are still a part of the Passover meal celebrated by our Hebrew brothers and sisters. As a poem, it’s beautifully crafted into two parts joined by the central question: “Who is like the LORD our God.....?”

The first four verses are a call to praise the Lord in all time and space, from east to west, from sunrise to sunset. Praise the Lord who is beyond human categories and boundaries like “nations” and “heaven.” The last four verses proclaim why this Lord is to be praised. Praise the Lord not only for who God is but for what God does. For this Lord who is seated on high, sees and cares about us, even and especially, those who are overlooked, pushed aside, marginalized by the rest of us. This Lord who is beyond our comprehension has compassion for the suffering of creation and promises mercy, the righting of wrongs and injustice. The praise of this psalm and all worship is not the “battering” up of a deity to win favor but an act of thanksgiving for a Lord who is both

beyond human rational thought but closer than breathing; A God who is great and majestic yet wants to be known, even gave us God's name — Yahweh (noted LORD in print) — so we may call upon God personally and as a community This is the Lord we praise. This is the Lord who we worship this morning. This is the Lord who is present, right here with us, now.

I wonder if folks who wander into the average mainline worship service get that sense of praise that vibrates in our psalms. That is not to say that only those who spontaneously shout, "Amen!" or raise their hands are worshiping. Yet I do worry that the order and comfort of our church and worship can lead us to complacency... can lull us into forgetting who this God is that we gather around each Sunday. Standing outside the church looking in, writer Annie Dillard puts it this way:

"On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews." ¹

Psalm 113 summons us to face the vastness and closeness of the almighty, all powerful Lord. Psalms like 113 aren't simply intended to be "nice" but rousing, poking, shaking us to wake up to the Lord in whom we baptize, the Father-Son-Holy Spirit who is faithful but not domesticated, familiar but not tame, loving but not fooled. We are, right now, in the presence of the creator of the universe, the savior of the world, the sustainer of life and eternity. Do we believe that? Psalm 113 demands we stop to realize the power of that truth. It calls us to pause to remember the greatness and

grace of God, so that our words of praise, the petitions of our prayers, the very peace we offer one another are not well-meaning but empty words but full of the knowledge and name of the Lord. We do not speak to the air. "Amen," isn't simply the way we end a prayer. Amen means "so be it," "make it so" ---- it's a bold request to the Lord who is worthy of both reverence and trust.

When are those times you are fully aware of the greatness and nearness of God, when praise spontaneously wells up and spills over? What are those moments when you are truly captured in the marvel of God's creation or ways?. At the birth of your child or her graduation? At the sound of the sea or a sky painted with unimagined colors at sunset? When the unexplainable made the unlikely come together for good? When the cancer was declared in remission or a suffering loved one found peace in death?

I stood at the entrance of Barefoot Bernies on Monday when the sky opened up with torrential rain. I was with our new member, Irene Giffen. We had gone to dinner before a meeting of the Washington County Coalition of Lutheran Churches and we were due there in twenty minutes. We looked at each other and the people running to come in from the down pour. We told the young man holding the door to come in, we needed to wait until it let up a bit. He asked Irene where her van was parked. He then offered to go get it and bring it under the cover of the entry way. After a moment pause, Irene gave him the keys and off he ran to the van, getting soaked. I stepped out the door and felt a tap on my shoulder. It was Jim, the son-in-law of Delores Carson, another Haven member. "That's my son," he said with a smile. I smiled back with the "wow" for a surprise that seems beyond mere coincidence.

In the meantime, an African-American woman with two small girls has come out, also caught in the rain, with somewhere to go. The mother asked Irene if I was a nun. Irene told her no, I was a pastor. She wondered if we could watch her girls while she ran

for her van. I said sure and gave her my umbrella to use. In moments, Irene was getting into her van and I was carrying a lovely little one to her place in the back of her Mom's van. Even at the time I knew I had been a participant in a glimmer of the Kingdom of God — the world as God wants it. Strangers helping, trusting, sharing and delighted despite the storm. Praise God. I've told that story to countless people this week. The wonder of God's ways just needing to be told. Praise the Lord!

On Thursday, I was returning unused balloons to Party City. As I was walking to the store, a young man with layers of clothing and a backpack was standing there. I confess to taking a breath of caution. He looked homeless and we smiled at each other. The man had cat on a leash so I couldn't resist. "You don't see cats on leashes very often," I said. "Yes, she's a bit unusual," he said, "I rescued her. She usually travels on my shoulders and she has seven toes." Well that was it, I had to go over and visit him and the cat. Never did figure out the seven toes, but he told me a friend and he were waiting for a guy to pick them up who was giving them a job with a traveling carnival. His friend, soon walked up and he had a kitten standing on his backpack. "You have one, too" I said. "Yeah, she's learning how to ride really quickly." I found myself wishing they weren't waiting for a ride so I could offer them some coffee and hear their stories. After a few more cat pets, I wished them luck. "Thanks." When I came out of the store, they and their cats were getting into someone's car and drove away. I felt incredibly grateful. My suspicion or timidness almost got in the way of a simply nice encounter and public witness. Two rough looking young guys and an older, collared-pastor-lady on the sidewalk of a shopping center, sharing a few moments of mutual appreciation and kindness over two rescued cats. God was there and I was lucky enough to realize it. "Praise you, Lord!"

What about you? Think about it. Think of those times that “Thank you, Lord” sprang into your thoughts and maybe even spilled over into spoken words. You may be able to think of some instances with little effort. You may be at a place when it’s hard to remember any at all. In either case, think about it this week. It is that awareness and connection with the goodness of God that is stuff of praise and worship. Remember moments when God — the Lord who sits on high *and* stoops to raise the rejected — is real, loving and listening ---- and worthy of our attention and praise. Will we always feel that each time we come to church? Probably not. But it does not make it any less true. “Praise, O servants of the LORD; praise the name of the LORD,” not just when it feels right but because it is right and good to offer God our thanks and praise. Let our prayers and worship not be thoughtlessly rote but vibrant with the voices of a people who know praise, humility and gratitude are due to the Lord who IS always here ---- passionately powerful and eternally loving. “Let everything that breathes, praise the LORD.” Amen.

Linda M Alessandri 6/6/15

ENDNOTE

1. Annie Dillard, Teaching a Stone to Talk (NY, NY: Harper & Row Publishers Inc. 1982) p. 40