

## Season after Pentecost

### Psalm of Praise

July 4/5, 2015

Haven Lutheran Church

Readings: Luke 7: 18-23; Psalm 146

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

What's the difference between "Hallelujah" and "Alleluia"? Is it like "you say "toe-may-toe" and I say "toe-mot-toe" .... you say "ee-ther" and I say "eye-ther" ... you say "ay-men", I say "ah-men"? Turns out, it's really a translation difference. "Hallelujah" comes from the Hebrew for "Hallel" — praise — and "Yah" ---- "God" [or the unsaid "Yahweh"]. When the Greeks translated the Hebrew, they didn't have a letter for the "h" so they wrote it "Alleluia," and so it was also in Latin. Whether you read, see or hear Hallelujah or Alleluia, it means "Praise God!" (Praise the Lord) Now, something else interesting. Most dictionaries define "Alleluia" as a noun – an exclamation or expression of praise. But in psalm 146, Alleluia — Praise God — is no noun. It is a verb. In our psalm today, it is not only a verb but an imperative form of the verb. It's a command. "Praise God" is not just a word to punctuate a hymn, but a call to action. "Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord, O my soul! I will praise the LORD as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God all my life long."

The last five psalms in the Psalter all begin and end with Hallelujah — Praise God. Prior to these final five are 145 songs that expressed a great range of emotions and circumstances. There are psalms about great joys and crushing sorrows, the celebration of victories, the enthronement of kings. The psalms include outcries of anger and fear, reports of defeats, persecution, and feelings of abandonment, yet, also, they include exuberant accounts of deliverance from the pit and profuse expressions of gratitude, thanksgiving and ultimately trust in the Lord. After that whole roller coaster array of experiences, the collection concludes with five rousing, unbridled songs that call us to praise God — Alleluia. In fact these final five are the "Daily Hallel" psalms recited every day in the morning synagogue service, even today.<sup>1</sup>

No matter what else may be going on in one's life, in the nation or world, the congregation is called to "Praise the Lord," the creator and deliverer, who cares for the oppressed, the ignored, the forgotten, and those in great need.

Why is that? "Praise God" when there are still bad things happening, crisis looming, frightening uncertainties and daily challenges? Is that just wishful thinking, rose colored glasses or denial? No, this Hallelujah arises from a faith-filled realism that comes from

going through hardships and coming out on the other side in one piece. It has been sung by peoples who survived exile, persecution and the Holocaust. This praise to God has been sung by peoples who fought a Goliath-world power to be free and independent and it was sung by enslaved people denied their basic dignity and freedoms. Praise God in all situations isn't pie in the sky denial. It is a profession of faith. "God is good." ("All the time.") All the time (God is good) is a song of praise to God who can be trusted despite circumstances, even when we don't understand. *That* is what those other 145 psalms said over and over again. *That* is what we see in the stories of the Old Testament and most perfectly in Jesus. God is faithful and present. God's actions and intent are always and ever life-giving and loving. So when evil, sickness or sin is rattling our lives, we can be certain it is not God who is causing the pain or havoc for that would be contrary to the very character of God revealed to us in Scriptures and Jesus.

So for thousands of years, Hebrews and Christians have recited these psalms of praise to God, even in dark days, dungeons, death camps, prisoner of war cells, and hospice beds because God IS good, God DOES care and God's goodness and compassion will outlive any terrorist, Hitler, ISIS, dictator or self-serving leader in which people put their trust and who will one day return to dust. And while we may wish the God we praise would simply step in and stop the latest cruelty or trial, in faith we stand by our Alleluias. We "praise who we trust God to be, not the circumstances in which we find ourselves. We praise that love is, that God promises, that whether we feel it or not, whether it makes any difference in the outcomes we desire or not, God is with us in the pain of life, setting captives free, binding up the brokenhearted..... lifting up those who are bent, doubled over by life and death and love and loss."<sup>2</sup> Praising God is not an empty exercise or delusional. Hallelujah, Praise God is a bold, confession of faith in our Lord... it is a declaration of a saving truth about an eternal, loving Lord who will outlast any human evil and who labors to bring healing and life where we only see brokenness and death. In that truth and Lord we can find great comfort and strength to persevere.

The psalmists command to praise God offers other important wisdom. Praising God is an "antidote to fear and cynicism"<sup>3</sup> and we sure have plenty of that in ourselves and world. The invitation to praise God is an opportunity "to reorient our perceptions and expectations. We are encouraged to view the world around us in all its wonder and glory"<sup>4</sup> not just its gloom and problems. We are encouraged to view time and the world around us

as God's good creation, "in which suffering and evil are lamentable footnotes"<sup>5</sup> but not the whole story. "This Psalm encourages us to pay attention to the King of Faithfulness, rather than to allow our perceptions to be shaped by those whose recklessness permits them to use the fatherless and widow as pawns in a game of international chess. To praise such a Creator is an act of great faith."<sup>6</sup> To remind ourselves, our church and communities of such a Savior is an essential part of our calling as followers of Christ. Praising God summons us to step away from our fears and cynicism to stand with God. Praise the Lord in all circumstances is a pronouncement of hope grounded in God's nature and desires for God's creation. It's a gift we have to offer one another and a hurting world. We may not be able to fully explain with theological accuracies our hope or Lord, but that does not make it any less real or powerful. The Lord we have come to know in Scripture, in Jesus, in our own experiences is a faithful God in whom we place our trust and hope. That is the good news we remember and the hope we claim when we praise God.

Praise God is a confession of faith and a proclamation of hope. The writer of psalm 145 would add another dimension. Praising God calls us to see what God sees and to do what God longs to do.<sup>7</sup> "Psalm 146 calls us to work with God, rather than against God, to give food to the hungry, set the prisoners free, heal the blind, help the foreigner, care for the widowed, watch over the fatherless."<sup>8</sup> Psalm 145 is "a sermon addressed to the social conscience of those who sing it, stirring up divine compassion in human hearts for those whose humanity is in peril or distress."<sup>9</sup> One pastor said it this way to his Chicago congregation each Sunday: "Expect great things from God. Do great things for God."<sup>10</sup> Alleluia does not end with the song or prayer. Praise is not just an emotion so much as a way of life in response to who God is."<sup>11</sup> Praise is an offering of our whole selves to God in worship and all we do.

Whether you say Alleluia or Hallelujah, as Nike said, "Just do it" — Praise the Lord. Breathe in the breath of faith in the Creator and Savior and sing songs of comfort, hope and strength for the world to hear. Praise the Lord who is with us in the sun and in the storm. Praise the Lord who raised Jesus from death and showed God has both the power and will to overcome sin and death. Praise God to drive away fear and cynicism and reclaim God's vision for you, I, the church and world. Praise the Lord who wants so much more and better for all of God's creation. Praise God as a step into God's will so that Lord's kingdom comes here on earth as it is in heaven. Praise the Lord that we may grow

in faith, have the eyes of Christ, the power of the Spirit and lives that bear God's love in all we say and do. "Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord, O my soul! I will praise the LORD as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God all my life long." Amen.

Linda M Alessandri 7/4/15

## ENDNOTES

- 
1. Mark Throntveit, "Commentary on Psalm 146" posted on [www.workingpreacher.org](http://www.workingpreacher.org)
  2. Eugenia Gamble, "In Good Times and in Bad" as posted on [www.goodpreacher.com](http://www.goodpreacher.com)
  3. Donald D. Denton, Jr. "Stumbling Block as posted on [www.goodpreacher.com](http://www.goodpreacher.com)
  4. Denton
  5. Denton
  6. Denton
  7. Adapted from Ray S. Anderson sermon entitled "Realistic" posted on [www.goodpreacher.com](http://www.goodpreacher.com)
  8. Deborah Patterson, "Simple Words?" posted on [www.goodpreacher.com](http://www.goodpreacher.com)
  9. Anderson
  10. John Timothy Stone, pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago, early 1900s as quoted by Joanna Adams, "Mirror, Mirror" posted on [www.goodpreacher.com](http://www.goodpreacher.com)
  11. Gamble