

Easter-5-c2007

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First Church of Christ in Longmeadow UCC

Fifth Sunday of Easter

May 6, 2007

Psalm 148

John 13.31-35

Joy Finding Words

“Praise the LORD!”

—Psalm 148.1

Let us pray: In all that we say and do, may the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen. (Congregation is seated.)

For the second week in a row, we’re looking closely at one of the Psalms. We hear them—kind of—but we aren’t really paying close attention. With my preaching habits, at least—and I think with most preachers’ habits—this is unusual. The Psalms aren’t accustomed to being “front and center” in worship. They enhance our worship experience, but they don’t get much conscious consideration. Some of the Psalms are a bit strange, to be sure, but their ease of neglect isn’t really their fault. It is just that each Sunday they are in competition with

exciting drama from the Old Testament, fascinating theological arguments from the Epistles, and engaging parables from the Gospels. Most Sundays, the Psalm loses out.

Today gives us a rare opportunity to dig deeper. The Book of Psalms contains a rich treasure of poetry and prayer. Because the 150 Psalms are so varied, scholars have spent considerable effort classifying them into different categories. There are Psalms of Lament. There are royal Psalms. There are Psalms of Zion. There are Psalms for deliverance from enemies. And, there are many Psalms of praise. Psalm 148 is a wonderful song of praise.

Praise the Lord! The opening phrase of Psalm 148 is a common one. Even this phrase is a bit like background music. It is familiar. It is vaguely comforting. We assume we know what it means. But do we?

The phrase “Praise the Lord!” appears 43 times in the Bible. Of those 43 times, 35 are in the Book of Psalms. The ideal of praising God is very dear to the heart of this ancient Israelite prayer book. Many of the psalms of praise spend a lot of their poetry giving *reasons* for praise. An example would be Psalm 33:

Praise the LORD with the lyre; make melody to him with the harp of ten strings....For the word of the LORD is upright, and all his work is done in faithfulness. He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the steadfast love of the LORD. By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth. He gathered the waters of the sea as in a bottle; he put the deeps in storehouses. Let all the earth fear the LORD; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him. (Psalm 33.2, 4-8)

Psalm 148 operates in a different mode. Scant attention is given to justifying, or offering reasons for the necessity of praise. Just a couple of the psalm's 14 verses do this:

Let them praise the name of the LORD, for he commanded and they were created. He established them forever and ever; he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed....for his name alone is exalted; his glory is above earth and heaven. He has raised up a horn for his people, praise for all his faithful, for the people of Israel who are close to him. Praise the LORD! (Psalm 148.5-6,13-14)

Some Psalms spend literally *pages* giving the reasons that God is to be praised. But in Psalm 148, these reasons are practically *assumed*. For the most part, the rationale for praise is implied, rather than emphasized. In this psalm, the *summons* to praise is dominant.¹ It is in the

imperative voice. Reasons are secondary. You might call it a Nike psalm: Just do it!

Imperative. Praise is not an option for God's people. It is a requirement. It *must* happen. It is imperative, but praise is not a duty. For those who know God, it is unavoidable and irresistible. Psalm 148 demonstrates this, because the praise tumbles out in a very flamboyant way. It starts out normal enough:

Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his host! Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars! (2-3)

Sun and moon. Stars and angels. These are common elements of religious imagery. But then, like a snowball rolling down a hill, the psalm starts to accumulate other—less religiously approved—images. It is as though its own velocity of praise is carrying it along through unfamiliar territory:

Praise the LORD from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps, fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command! (7-8)

Rolling, rolling, gathering more of the creation in its wake, the psalm continues:

Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars! Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds! (9-10)

It makes me smile just to read it: sea monsters, fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind, fruit trees and cedars, creeping things, flying birds. The psalm is so wonderfully specific and so generously inclusive. The entire creation, including (last but not least) human beings, is enthusiastically enlisted into the praise of God.

One famous German student of the Psalms aptly describes the praise of God as “joy finding words.”² Joy finding words. That really captures it. When we praise the Lord, something ineffable finds a voice. With deep roots in the love of God and the grace of Jesus Christ, a sense of joy wells up within our hearts. Before long, it overflows from our lips. It finds words. It doesn’t create words, for the words—like the joy—are a gift from the very Object of praise.

“Joy has a tendency to spread out to others so that they can join it.”³ Gathering together for worship is not just a nice addition to the individual imperative of praising God. It is not until we are together that praise can truly happen. It is not accident, I think, that church is

practically the only place where normal, everyday people gather together and *sing*. Six days a week we depend on concert halls and electronic gadgets for our music. But on Sunday, we all get to sing praises to God.

In our lives, there is always a mixture of sadness and joy. There are beautiful things—little babies, first kisses, and the smell of coffee in the morning (sun and moon, shining stars). But there are also ugly things—nasty co-workers, urban blight, and bitter arguments with those we love (sea monsters and all deeps). And there are frightening things—illness, impairment, and death (fire and hail, stormy wind). Whatever our present challenges, the imperative of praise remains. Joy may be deep and hidden, but in the presence of God it finds words nonetheless.

Here, in this place, in the midst of all that life throws at us, joy finds words. Let the people say, “Praise the Lord!”

Let us pray. Gracious God, in this hour of worship, open up shafts to deep reserves of praise and gratitude. Let us not sing out of duty or habit, but out of a joy that must find voice. Amen.

¹ Claus Westermann, *The Living Psalms* (Edinburgh/Grand Rapids: T&T Clark/Eerdmans, ET 1989), pages 256 ff.

² Westermann, *The Living Psalms*, page 257.

³ *Ibid.*