

Proper 17A: Psalm 30  
Church of the Good Shepherd  
The Rev. W. Terry Miller  
September 3, 2023

### The Problem with Praise

Today we come to the conclusion of our sermon series on the psalms. We've covered a good deal of territory these past several weeks. We've looked at how and why Christians should pray the psalms, how we should see them as a "toolbox" for prayer, a course of study in relating to God. And we've considered the different kinds of psalms—Psalms of Lament, where we are taught to cry out to God in our hurt and distress; Cursing Psalms, which show us how we don't have to keep our feelings of anger to ourselves, but can give them to God to use for his purposes. And last week we looked at the Penitential Psalms, confession prayers, which invite us to bring our sins before a loving and forgiving Father. Today we come to our final class of psalms—Praise Psalms, psalms of thanksgiving—which are the most common kind of psalm, the kind we're most likely to hear in church.

Funny thing is, as happy as "psalms of praise" may sound at first, these prayers can be more challenging to pray, more of a challenge than even the vengeful prayers and penitential prayers. For while we may balk at expressing our darker thoughts to God, praise can seem, let's face it, boring, naive, and even embarrassing.

Why this is can be seen when you consider the growth of "*praise services*" in churches in recent years. A while back, it became fashionable for churches to offer a new, non-traditional worship service known as "Praise Services." We had one here for a time. And praise was about all that was done in these services. The music that was played—"*praise music*"—was all contemporary, or at least written in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Now, most of these songs haven't aged well. Most are forgettable. This is because praise music tends to be simplistic musically, theologically shallow, and sentimentally saccharine. But these songs *were* positive and upbeat. And they had the virtue of sounding like what you'd hear on the radio. So those who weren't familiar with hymns, who may have difficulty finding their way around a traditional order of worship, would have an easier time participating in a "praise service." Because everyone knows how to praise...*right?*

Many Christians have a similar reaction to reading praise psalms in worship. "Praise God, Praise God, alleluia..." *yada, yada, yada*. Churchgoers read these psalms in the bulletin and gloss over them, because they seem "canned," one-dimensional. Sure, worship should include praise, we suppose, but the praise psalm is rarely something you connect with. It's just "there," a set piece, isolated and detached from the drama of life. That's how a lot of us approach praise psalms. That's how *I* approach them, I admit, a lot of the time. I see that we have praise psalm coming up on a Sunday and I just ignore it, because praising God doesn't strike me as interesting, not as interesting as interpreting Jesus' parables or exploring the complex theology of the epistles. The psalms just seem, well, shallow or, worse, artificial in their entreaties to "praise God! praise God!"

I should know better, that this isn't fair to the psalms or to us. For we can only dismiss these prayers because we see them as promoting generic platitudes—"God is great"—and we forget that they come to us within a context, as part of an ongoing story, as a response to a momentous turn of events in the psalmist's life.

In today's psalm, Psalm 30, for example, we read:

I will exalt you, O LORD, because you have lifted me up  
and have not let my enemies triumph over me.  
O LORD my God, I cried out to you, and you restored me to health.  
You brought me up, O LORD, from the dead;  
you restored my life as I was going down to the grave.

There's clearly a story here—the psalmist has been “lifted up,” “saved from enemies,” “healed,” “restored to life.” What precisely has happened, we don't know. But it was obviously a big deal to the psalmist. Some think this psalm to be a companion piece to Psalm 6, which we looked at a few weeks ago. In that lament, you'll remember, the author was hounded by enemies, under threat. In response, we saw, the psalmist sought to get God to act by twisting His arm with the promise of praise: “Alive I will praise you. But if I die, you won't get any more praise out of me.” Well, if Psalm 30 is any indication, it worked! God saved him and now he's here thanking God for his deliverance.

When we view the praise psalms like this, against the background of some great distress, these prayers no longer seem boring or naive. Indeed, praise psalms, no less than lament psalms, are prayed in *full awareness* of the unrelenting difficulty of human life. The ancient Israelites were not a sanguine, happy-go-lucky people. There were no Pollyannas back then. Rather they were aware that their survival depended entirely on the slender thread of prayer and faithfulness that bound them to God. Praying their prayers, we are in effect invited into this awareness, invited to discover God's hand in our lives, in our deliverance, in our good fortune, in our recovery. This is what makes the praise psalms not routine, but *revolutionary*. Because it's too easy these days to assume that all that happens to us is the result of our own actions, or else just the result of random chance. By turning our attention heavenward, the praise psalms remind us that our lives are in fact in God's hands, not ours, and that our future unfolds according to his providence.

Here we begin to sense another truth in the praise psalms—that praising God is more for our good than it is for God's. Worship, you see, is not about flattering God or “bribing” him with our praises. God doesn't *need* our praise. That doesn't mean the psalmists are above using praise as a bargaining chip, as we've seen, but they would encourage us to see a bigger picture. For, far from presenting “rose-colored glasses,” praise helps us to look at the world realistically, unsentimentally, as it really is—as the object of God's care and blessing. This is a crucial insight about the essential function of praise. Praising God is not concocted flattery, but the most earnest human business we may undertake—to see the world as cared for by God.

This is the perspective offered in another praise psalm, Psalm 33, printed in the back of the bulletin insert. This psalm emphasizes in the strongest terms both God's total sovereignty over his creation and also the bond that God actively sustains with it every day. The strength of that bond depends

on the good faith of both parties, evidenced on the one side by God's patient concern for "those who wait upon his love [his *hesed*]" (v18), and on the other, by our patient confidence in God: "Our soul waits for the LORD." (v20)

That word, "waits," is particularly important here. For the psalmist to say he "waits" implies that the crisis is not over. While he calls others to join him in giving thanks, it doesn't sound like everything has come to a happy resolution, like at the end of a Shakespearean comedy, "all's well that ends well." There's still more to be done, more to be worked out. And so the psalmist waits. Like the lament psalms, this psalm of praise ends not with fulfillment but with anticipation. The final lines of this psalm speak to this, to the psalmist's confidence in God: "in his holy Name we put our trust" (v21). But that trust does not resolve the tension, the tension present to some degree, at least, in all prayer. For, people who pray are people who live in hope, not in satisfaction.

Which is why, even as the psalmist waits upon God, he urges the righteous to rejoice, to sing praises (v1). In that call to rejoice lies a profound understanding of worship: we cannot defer praising God until we are fully satisfied with our situation. The basic dynamic of praise is not that God gives us something and we say, "Gee, thanks," out of gluttoned hearts. Instead, through praise we discover how much we have in fact *already* been given.

This is important, because it's easy to praise when something good comes your way. "I just got a raise at work! Er, uh, praise the Lord!" It's harder to praise God when you are suffering or someone you love suffers. But of course we experience both situations in our lives. One of my colleagues tells me of how one Sunday morning, as parishioners exited after the service, a man handed him a piece of paper—a check... for \$500!—made out to the church's welfare fund." That's just my little way of praising God," he explained, "I've met a wonderful woman and yesterday she said 'Yes,' to my proposal. Need to set a date with you for the wedding sometime in May. Use the money to help somebody who's in need." Praise the Lord!, right? Well, sadly, less than two years later, that same man found himself in the priest's office, his face in his hands, weeping, his marriage having ended in recrimination and anger. Many things come to mind to say in that instance, but Praise the Lord! isn't one of them.

But then you have the woman I saw on the TV evening news. She stood in front of the ruins of her little house, which had been consumed by a fire that raged for an hour. Her electric heater, the little one that she was using to keep her warm, had caught her curtains on fire and the little frame house had burned to the ground. But to the TV reporter she said, "Still, I've got lots to be thankful for. I praise my Lord." The reporter's astonishment was written across his face: Praise God for what? "I just praise God that I got me and my dog out in time," she continued. "I was so proud of this little house, but it was always cold in the winter. Maybe the Lord has something better in mind for me. I'm alive. I've got my dog, and we'll see what's next."

Now, I'm all in favor of a positive attitude, but really? Her praising God in the midst of this tragedy makes this woman sound like she'd lost her grip on reality, makes her and Christians in general seem like we are living in some sort of dream world. Or is it perhaps the case that her reality is faith in God, in a God who is gracious and who provides for those who suffer need and misfortune?

This is the reason, I think, why we are called to praise not only when we *feel* like praising, but also more importantly when we don't. The world only knows how to praise when life is going well, when good things are happening. The psalms teach us to praise even when things are *not* going well, *especially* when they are not. For, in the process of praising God, we are called to an awareness of all the reasons we have to praise God. Praise takes us out of our grief and resentment and fear, and puts us in a place of gratitude, where we *can't help* but praise.

I mean, I bet there are some here this morning who know what I'm taking about—you come to church intending to lament, to whine, to protest, to count your many misfortunes, only to be turned around—maybe during the singing of a hymn, or the reading of Scripture, or the chanting of a psalm—and you're surprised by gratitude. Something gets hold of you and you are, in the words of the old Wesley hymn, “lost in wonder, love, and praise.”

That is what God wants for us, what we've been made for—to be caught up, lifted up in joyful praise. C.S. Lewis said that “joy is the serious business of heaven.” One day the joyful praise that we experience here in worship Sundays, in spite of ourselves and despite our situation at the moment, *that joy* will one day be for all eternity. We were created for this, for praise. And the psalms train us for it. And one day we will joyfully praise forever: Thanks be to God!