Praise

Psalm 150

Buckingham Church

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“Praise the Lord!” invites the Psalmist. Why? Why should we come and sing and play instruments and dance and say how great God is? As children sometimes do to parents, are we trying to get on God’s good side so we can get something from God? Do we think that if we praise God, we’ll get a “plus” on our heavenly record? Do we think God needs to have their ego stroked by our praises, so God doesn’t decide to take us out again like with the Great Flood?

Well, of course that sounds ridiculous. What kind of petty and small God would that be! I have some other thoughts on why we praise God.

How about because when someone does something incredibly nice for you, it is common for you to say, “thank you.” And all it takes is a look around the beauty of this earth to be amazed and thankful. As Psalm 148 puts it, “Praise God for sea monsters and all deeps!” Praise God who made the koala bears and humpback whales, who made the soft fur of a cat and bright feathers of a lorikeet, who made redwood and dogwood trees, and our American yellowwood that was so stunning last Sunday. Praise God who made people in such great variety and beauty! That’s the easy one. We praise because we are grateful.

But also, praise God when things are tough. That’s harder. If you’ve ever been to a Jewish funeral, you have experienced the saying of a prayer called the Kaddish. It’s often called the Jewish Prayer for the Dead, but if you read the words, you realize it’s not about death. It’s a prayer solely in praise of God! It’s a reminder that God is so much more than us, and yet intimately involved in our lives, including our suffering and struggle. For Christians, we praise God that Jesus came in our flesh and knows what it is to suffer.

Several years ago, when I pastored a church in New Haven, I met with a group of African American clergy who used to do “Prayer Walks” around a poor neighborhood in the city, often stopping at houses where there were bullet holes. As we walked, the leader would often shout, “Glory!” and we would repeat the word. When I asked why, he told me that he hoped folks would remember that there was a God who created us for joy and love and beauty and walked with us in struggle and pain, carrying us through and above it all. We praise God because we need to remember in the midst of struggle that God is, and we are not alone.

We praise God because we love God and are loved, the same way we praise a beloved partner or friend or child, as a way of expressing our love for them. Not because we expect anything in return, just because we are filled with love and want to express that love. It’s a way of continuing to deepen our relationship with God, our connection to the one who loved us first and loves us best.

And we praise God because it just feels so darn good to do so. I remember when my kids graduated from Hamden High School, the principal would always ask the crowd not to shout out and clap for each graduate so that every family could hear their child’s name read aloud. Epic fail, though, because some families were just so happy that their kiddo graduated that they couldn’t help but shout and clap and cry with joy! It happens sometimes at a sporting event, or a musical concert or theater show. It even happens in the movie theater sometimes, when you know the actors can’t hear you, but you clap anyway out of sheer pleasure or excitement. Spontaneous joy, bubbling up and overflowing, because, as my Southern friends like to say, “God is good, all the time. All the time, God is good.” Even the frozen chosen New England church folk can have moments of that kind of joy in God that prompt us to want to praise, whether or not we raise our hands or shout Amen! And maybe we need to give ourselves permission to let that kind of love and joy and praise take us over now and then!

One of my favorite hymns, that most people don’t know, has the terrific last line “For the wonders that astound us, for the truths that still confound us, most of all, that love has found us, thanks be to God!” (repeat) (For the Fruit of All Creation, Fred Pratt Green).

I think we need to say this Psalm again, feeling all the reasons we come in praise. Get those instruments, and if you didn’t have one before and want one now, they are spread all around the sanctuary!

Psalm 150, this time in the Message translation. Repeat after me and make some noise!

Hallelujah!  
Praise God in the holy house of worship,  
    praise God under the open skies;  
Praise God for divine acts of power,  
    praise God for magnificent greatness;  
Praise with a blast on the trumpet,  
    praise by strumming soft strings;  
Praise with castanets and dance,  
    praise with banjo and flute;  
Praise with cymbals and a big bass drum,  
    praise with fiddles and mandolin.  
Let every living, breathing creature praise God!  
    Hallelujah!

Amen!