

Psalm 150

Today is our fifth and last Sunday on the Psalms. Psalm 150, in very few words, guides us in praising God. In only six verses, we learn who, where, and how to praise, the motivation to praise, and who or what should do the praising.

Yahweh is to be praised in his holy place, a reference to the Temple in Jerusalem, and in his mighty firmament, recalling the creation of the entire cosmos from Genesis - that is, all God's world and creation. Why should Yahweh be praised? Because Yahweh is praise-able; Yahweh is worthy of praise. Who would be praising Yahweh? You, me, and all that has life; all that breathes, with no limits. "All that breathes" brings us full circle to the actions of the one who is to be praised. Our identity is defined in terms of Yahweh's identity as the one who first breathed life into us.

Now to the major question of the Psalm: How are we to praise God? We praise God "according to God's surpassing greatness". The Psalm does not say we are to praise God according to God's actions. Instead, we are to praise God according to God's being. The six verses flesh out how we are to understand God's surpassing greatness. Essentially, God's surpassing greatness is highly sensory and diverse; it is not to be missed in its aural, as it pertains to the ear, kinesthetic or tactile, and visual grandeur.

The editor of the Psalms organized the collection into five "books," each of which ends with a summons to praise or a doxology, which is a hymn of praise. The

last of these calls to praise is Psalm 150 itself, but this doxology serves double duty; it ends not only the fifth “book” of the Psalter, but also the entire Psalter. It is a doxology of doxologies. The closing or final doxology, or hymn of praise, actually began with Psalm 146, with its opening summons to “Praise the Lord!” Similarly, each of the last five psalms in the Psalter begins and ends with this precise: “Praise the Lord!” or, in Hebrew, “Hallelujah!”

In the last of the Psalms, the word Hallelujah is used repeatedly; it becomes an insistent drumbeat that rises steadily to a crescendo of praise. The word “hallel” - which in Hebrew means to praise - is used over and over again in this Psalm, thirteen times in just six verses. “Hallelu” is actually the plural imperative of the verb “hallel.” An imperative is an obligation. And “jah” (yah) is shorthand for the personal name of God, Yahweh. So, “Hallelujah” means, or is translated as, “You all praise Yahweh!” It is a call not to the individual hearer or reader, but to the whole community - a summons to “everything that has breath”.

The Psalm comes off the page and meets the faithful aurally - right where it counts - the ear - faith comes through hearing. Try to imagine the cacophony created when trumpets, lute, harp, tambourine, strings, pipe, clanging cymbals, loud clashing cymbals are all mixed. This is no ordinary composition of sounds.

The choice of instruments defies logic. God’s surpassing greatness is difficult to miss and defies a certain organizational logic. The Psalm suggests we do the same to return praise. A number of composers through the ages have helped us to

do so: Bruckner, Britten, Rutter, and Franck. Church musicians have been helpful commentators on the Psalms. It is through music that we praise God.

Duke Ellington's "Sacred Concerts" series included a number entitled "Praise God and Dance," a direct invocation of Psalm 150: "Praise him with the tambourine and dancing; praise him with strings and flutes!" The Sacred Concerts illustrated how jazz, long denounced in religious circles as vulgar "devil's music," can rise to the level of the sacred.

Ellington's genius in quoting Psalm 150, helps to demonstrate that long before the Sacred Concert series, the ancient Israelites recognized that **all** musical instruments could be used to praise their God. After all, as biblical scholars regularly note, the psalm seems to list all the instruments known to the ancients. In the world behind the text of this psalm - the world that produced the psalm - no musical instrument was too loud, too clanging, too clashing, or too "vulgar" to praise the Israelite God.

Why all the praise? Many of the preceding psalms focus on the reason to praise God. But this psalm, focusses primarily on how and where to praise - not why. Each verse that follows is an intensification of the previous - the praise seems to get louder and louder; first with trumpet, then with lute, and harp, next with tambourine and dance, then with strings and pipe; followed by clanging cymbals, and finally "loud clashing cymbals." With each additional instrument listed, the crescendo of praise grows louder, less controlled.

Psalm 150 reminds us that praising God will not be a silent endeavour. This is not surprising since the one we praise is not silent. God speaks creation into being. We praise God through sound, yes, but also through the movement of our bodies as Miriam did in Exodus; she praised with tambourine and dance. Those who are willing to defy logic, even dare to “shake it” a bit while singing, or clapping their hands, are praising God. So, we praise God with our voices and with our bodies. We praise God in word and deed. Praise Yahweh!

Perhaps the final editors of the book of psalms felt that the preceding 149 psalms more or less summed up all the reasons why one might praise Yahweh. Or perhaps, with its call to praise loudly, unabashedly, with music and dance, a call directed at everything that breathes, the psalm is a stark reminder that, for the world of the ancient Israelites, praise abides above and beyond all else, even above and beyond a reason for praise. Hallelujah, no matter what or why.

Of course, during the Easter season, praise comes easy. But once Easter is over and done, it can be more difficult - moments and times when praise of an all-powerful creator - or the world God made - does not come easy - nor feels natural or even right in the face of disaster, next to the bedside of a cancer patient, by a grieving parent - the imperative to praise can ring hollow, no matter how big or grand or amazing the creator's deeds might be.

In the Jewish and Roman Catholic traditions, this psalm has played a role in the everyday - times and space where the reality of wanting to cry out and lament

instead of praise might seem more appropriate. In Judaism, Psalm 150 is part of the everyday morning service. In Catholicism, the “Morning Rite” or “Lauds” includes this psalm in the “Laudate Psalms.”

The call to praise found throughout today’s psalm takes on an even more profound meaning when placed in worship and praise of God in the day-to-day, especially when the day-to-day means early mornings, aching joints, worries over bills, unemployment, social injustices, travel plans or sick relatives and of course, all the wonderful and good things that can happen in the day-to-day world. Perhaps that is why Psalm 150 does not tell its readers why to praise, but only how.

This returns us to the world in front of the text, and to Duke Ellington’s masterful “Praise God and Dance!” Ellington’s piece made jazz a vehicle for spiritual expression. He combined the secular, the mundane, and the everyday with the sacred, which often seems too extraordinary and extraordinarily other, and showed how closely the two are linked. He did this as a legendary jazz performer and an African American male in a time when racism ran rampant throughout the United States.

It’s hard to imagine how such a revolutionary move - bringing jazz with its trumpets and cymbals and dance - into stately cathedrals during a period of turmoil and racism could not have inspired some to praise even if there were moments and days when praise of an all-powerful creator or the world God had made, with all of its injustices, did not come easy.

In John's Gospel, which is paired with our Psalm, Jesus shows what is necessary and essential -that we worship God in spirit and in truth. The place we worship God is not as important as the state of mind in which we worship.

As we simultaneously try to embrace the lofty psalm and the lowly woman at the well, the cacophony of praise and the intimacy of conversation, the music of all creation and the song unfold in just this one heart.

Our own limited mind has a tendency to trivialize the span of God's reach. And it is our own denying mind that categorized the "lowly" woman as someone apart from us instead of someone who is part OF us. Comparing and compartmentalizing and categorizing are the things we do. But when Jesus shows up, this way of thinking dies away. It did for the woman in his presence. It does for us as well during worship at its best.

The psalmist and Jesus suggest an absence of hierarchy between lofty and lowly, a blind eye to all the things that divide and label us, and a keen insight into the heart of the matter: All is One. Or as Paul said, in God we live and breathe and have our being. And Peter said, "I now truly understand that God shows no partiality."

The woman at the well is one of the psalm's breathing creatures who, in the presence of spirit and truth, is so attuned to the breath of God, that she can now fully be the instrument she was created to be. And she returns to her community making beautiful noise.

When you remember just how much and how unconditionally God loves and values you, you won't be thrown off-centre by anyone's attempts to make you feel as worthless as they do. When you remember just how powerful God's love is to heal, you won't have to flee from things that remind you of your own vulnerabilities and wounds. When you remember what God's love looks like in the flesh, in the person of Jesus, you will know how to respond. Keep in touch with that love in the core of your being, and you'll be able to respond with authenticity and with love no matter what you're faced with ... love is the fundamental, powerful, and inevitable Word through which the universe was made and lives, and for which it is destined.

In a culture where only men can initiate marriage or divorce, this woman was thrown away by five husbands, and now is used by one who won't commit to her. In a culture where women draw water in order of social status, she's there for her morning water at noon. She's a pariah. He's a Jew and she's a Samaritan; he's a rabbi, she's a woman.

She has no reason to expect an exchange at all, let alone respect, and certainly not an engaging theological discussion. But, he sees her ... *her*, not people's judgment of her. He sees her as she is, and accepts her without judgment: she is not immoral; she has been used. He sees her wound. And he sees truth in her. He sees her not as someone flawed, but someone gifted.

He talks theology with her, longer than with anybody else in the Gospels. Then she leaves her water jug, not out of forgetfulness, but because she knows she's

coming back. She goes into the village and the former outcast becomes the first Christian evangelist. She brings people to Jesus. Something happened to her that changed her.

Imagine this: Jesus comes to you in the dull midday heat of your ordinary life. You are bound by judgments of how good you are. And he sees through that. Sees you. *You*. Your soul. He sees your wounds, sees your giftedness. He sees how your wounds inhibit your gifts ... and yet can propel your gifts. And in his knowing he sets you free. Leave your water jug. What is the *new* in you to tell? What will you do? How will you tell?

Psalm 150 tells you how. The beauty of this psalm - which calls everyone and everything that breathes to praise God with trumpet, cymbals, and dance, in what seems to be any and every way - is that it frees one to praise loudly, with clanging and clashing, both in times of triumph and in the day-to-day. Leave your water jug! Everyone, everywhere, praise! Praise!! Praise!!!