

# “Praise the Lord, O my Soul!”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – November 8, 2009*

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Psalm 146

Mark 12:28-34

Today's psalm opens the final part of God's song book, with five selections that are called the “Psalms of Praise.” Like much of the Psalms, it calls us to thank God for creating, guiding, protecting and sustaining us: it calls us to give praise.

And yet, this is not a text that simply says to us, "Say thanks to God when good things happen." It is a text that calls us to praise God in every circumstance, not because we want to or feel like it, but because of the very character of God.<sup>1</sup> Giving praise is a choice that we make. It is gratitude in action. It is not an emotion so much as a way of life lived in response to who God is more than what God does for us.

Sometimes, even when good things happen to us, we fail to give praise because we give ourselves all the credit; or we believe that the good thing – the positive review, the good grade, the flattering comment, the healthy check-up – warrants all the celebration.

While we may not be terrific at praising when things go well, most of us probably have an even harder time when things do not go well; when life hurts, and somewhere deep in our souls we wonder about the character of God, about God's care for us. In those not-so-good times, we wonder how we will endure, whether God is there at all, and if so what good does it do anyway. In those times, giving praise may be even harder.

A pair of stories in the news may have tested any resolve to give praise to God at all times and in all circumstance. First, our local elections – and some of their positive outcomes – were overshadowed last week by the emerging story of an alleged serial killer operating in our city. Through a bizarre string of circumstances, he went undetected for years while one girl after another went missing. Could the police have done more, or the neighbors, or the city government? What is there to be praised?

Meanwhile, in Texas, an out-of-control gunman injured or killed dozens in what seems like a senseless act of violence. What can the government, the military, and the mental health field say to console the families that have now lost

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<sup>1</sup> Eugenia Gamble, “In Good Times and in Bad” from *30Minutes*

their loved ones. This tragedy certainly puts a different emphasis on this week's commemoration of Veterans' Day.

*Praise the Lord, O my soul! I will praise the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praises to God all my life long.*

The psalmist then says that we should not place our trust in princes and mortals. Every human leader, every human institution, every human plan, is flawed and fleeting. But, God who created us, who came to be with us, and who sacrificed for us, is worthy to receive our praise.

We are called to praise who we trust God to be, not the circumstances in which we find ourselves. We praise that love is what God promises, and that whether we feel it or not, whether it makes any difference in the outcomes that we desire or not, God is with us in the pain of life, setting captives free, binding up the brokenhearted, opening blind eyes, and lifting up even those who feel bent over by life and death and love and loss.

Usually, we think of praising God with our voices, but we can also give praise to God with our tears. Once again, this is not a sentimental emotion, but an important, cleansing, and potentially healing action. For, tears are rooted in hope, even if it might seem at the time to be a dashed hope. Tears are rooted in the belief that somehow things could or should be different and the belief, even if only unconscious, that things can again someday be different, not by our will or efforts but only by the actions and love of God.

Psalm 146 lists ten active verbs to describe the kind of things that God is doing in the world. They point to the work of the one who created the world and everything in it and who seeks, through creation, to make hope come to pass. Our God:

- Keeps faith forever
- Executes justice for the oppressed
- Gives food to the hungry
- Sets the prisoners free
- Opens the eyes of the blind
- Lifts up those who are bowed down
- Loves the righteous
- Watches over the strangers
- Upholds the orphan and the widow
- Brings the wicked to ruin

We are not told specifically how God will meet these needs for us, and there certainly is no guarantee that those answers to our prayers will be what we expect. God does not promise in every instance to change things for us; instead, sometimes we are changed in order that things will eventually change. And a large part of our faithfulness is – as the millions who participate in recovery groups are reminded – the wisdom to perceive the difference.<sup>2</sup>

The Jewish scribe who engages Jesus in conversation in today’s gospel passage is described as being “not far from the kingdom of God.” He agrees wholehearted when Jesus announces that the greatest of the commandments tell us to love God and neighbor. The scribe therefore places himself at odds with his fellow religious leaders who have been criticizing Jesus for things like eating with sinners, working on the Sabbath and questioning the hypocrisy of the Temple establishment.

God loves the righteous, those in right relationship with God and neighbor. A righteous one joins God in those liberating activities that the psalmist has listed for us. We are told to love God with all of ourselves – our heart, our soul, our mind and our strength. And this love of God motivates God’s people to devote their sentiments, their piety, their thoughts and their energies to the way of life that God has instructed.<sup>3</sup>

And yet, who among us can offer such complete devotion to God? Even if our hands are working, our souls and minds may not be focused on God. Although Jesus offers the “love command” for God and neighbors in all four Gospels, Mark is alone in reminding us that in the Old Testament, in Deuteronomy, this same command, which is called the *shema*, is directed to the whole community. “Hear O Israel,” Jesus recounts, “the Lord our God, the Lord is one.”

As a community of faith, we are called to listen together to the *shema*, and to respond collectively to the “love command.” Not every one of us, as individuals, has the capacity to at all times love with our heart, soul, mind and strength. There are times that we are to work and times to rest. At times, some of us will shed tears, while others will be wiping away those tears.

Jesus says to the Jewish scribe, “you are not far from the kingdom of God.” And yet, it is not only him, but the entire collection of disciples and followers, fishermen and tax collectors, women and young boys, Jews and Samaritans and Romans, who – in the New Testament – are collectively able to take a glimpse at

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Morgan in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol. 4

<sup>3</sup> A.K.M. Adams in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol. 4

what Jesus had in mind when he announced that the kingdom of God had come near. As individuals, they were flawed people, incomplete in their understanding, unable to fathom how they could fulfill what God had instructed the people of Israel to hear so long ago, that God alone is Lord, and that we should give praise to God all the days of our life.

But, Jesus assures us, as communities of faith, of the one thing all of us want to hear. It is a message meant for all of us who live in a world that is filled with acts of senseless and unspeakable violence. It is for all of us who feel overwhelmed by our personal and family challenges. It is for all of us who spend our days swimming in the fickle currents of the church, at war with things both petty and impossible, who are tired, sometimes, even before the meeting or the worship hour begins, that we are “not far from the kingdom of God.”

It is only as a community of faith that we dare to take on the “love command” to God and neighbor; that we can fathom maintaining hope that God – with and in and through us – is working in the world for justice.

Daring acts of compassion come from a power that transcends us, yet operates through us. For the God at work in the world who is empowering us to live as we should, the psalmist gives praise.

*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.*