

Psalms for the Summertime: Psalm 150

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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A few days after Christmas 2019 found me driving to an unfamiliar salon, gift card in hand. My husband, Josh, had given me the card and told me to use it for something I usually wouldn't get to do. But the card had been losing value and gathering dust since Christmas or a birthday a couple of years earlier. I just kept filling my time in other ways.

But finally there I was, one early morning a few days after Christmas, chatting with the cheerful and capable stylist who was making a rats' nest of my hair now so that it would look better later. As we talked, she asked me a question I didn't expect. "Have you chosen a word for the new year?" she said. "A word for the new year...." I said. "You know, like perseverance, or focus, or commitment, or love. Sort of like summing up your goals in that word for next year rather than making New Year's resolutions." "Oh!" I said. I did like the sound of one simple guiding word for the year. "Well, I think for me it would be the word 'hope.'"

One word for the year 2020: "Hope." I chose "hope," I think, because our family had grieved a stillborn niece in the fall of 2019 and we were aware of her absence at Christmas. So when I looked to 2020 in hope, I think I hoped for healing, for new sources of joy, for a lightening, but not an eradication, of the weight in my sister and brother-in-law's hearts. It struck me much later that hope was a more fitting word than I could have imagined at the time. We all needed hope in 2020. Didn't we?

If the Hymn Writers Society of ancient Israel had held a hymn competition inviting lyrics on "The Word of a Lifetime," the one word that best characterized the meaning and goal of human life, I wonder if our psalm this morning could provide it. The writer of Psalm 150 certainly doesn't leave us without answers about what's most important to human life in his view. His song opens and closes with the same compound Hebrew word, Hallelujah! Praise the Lord! And riffs on it all the way through.

Psalm 150

Praise the LORD. Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens. Praise him for his acts of power; praise him for his surpassing greatness. Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet, praise him with the harp and lyre, praise him with timbrel and dancing, praise him with the strings and pipe, praise him with the clash of cymbals, praise him with resounding cymbals. Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD.

Praise the Lord, the song goes. You're invited! Come celebrate God with us! Tell him how great he is! Our praise will be loud and joyful. And soft and subdued. Rehearsed and improvisational; serious and playful. It will raise the roof of the earthly sanctuary and ascend to highest heaven. We'll give it everything we've got; drumming and clapping, dancing and stomping, bowing, strumming, plucking, and singing. Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!

Psalm 150 isn't the only psalm that seems to assume praising God gives life its meaning and purpose. The call to praise shows up all throughout the book. There are 5 grouped collections, "books within the book" of the psalms. Each of them ends on a note of praise. The Hebrew word for the book of Psalms, Tehillim, means "praises. It's based on the same word as "hallelujah." Somehow, every song in the psalms is an expression of praise. And finally, Psalms 146-149 each begin and end with the same word – "Hallelujah." Like Psalm 150, they issue a call and command to praise God. Together they form a five-psalm collection of exuberant praise songs.

It's not hard to make the case that for the psalmist, "Hallelujah" is a top contender for the one word that most shapes and characterizes human life. So I want to look at three things together this morning: WHY we praise; HOW we praise; and WHO is doing the praising.

First, why. Truthfully, Psalm 150 doesn't offer much about why we praise God. It's too full of praise! Verse 2 mentions, very briefly, God's "acts of power" and "surpassing greatness" as reasons for praise. But this psalm is much more interested in throwing a party than in explaining why there is one. It's as if, right here, at the end of a 150-chapter journey with God, God's acts of power and surpassing greatness have already been

writ large. There's no need to say why again; there's only the unrestrained expression of wonder and joy; honor and delight.

We need look no farther than Psalm 146-149, so similar in style to Psalm 150, for some of those reasons, though. Those psalms say things like this: Do not put your trust in princes...who cannot save.... Blessed is the one whose help is the God of Jacob...the maker of heaven and the earth, the sea and everything in them, the Lord, who remains faithful forever. He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry....” (146:2-7) “The Lord builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the exiles of Israel. He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.... He covers the sky with clouds and supplies the earth with rain....” (147:2, 8) “The Lord takes delight in his people; he crowns the humble with salvation.” (149:4)

The witness of the psalms is that God is not only powerful and transcendent; he is also near and personal. The God who made and sustains heaven and earth also mends hearts, heals wounds, and delights in saving his people. The whole creation is awash in his glory. That's why we praise him. Because he is worthy of it and commands it, and because he welcomes it.

Second, HOW do we praise? We praise God in melody, harmony, and rhythm, with every instrument, talent, and practiced skill we've got. Brass and woodwind; strings and percussion. We praise God with our bodies; feet that stomp, hands that clap, and hips that sway, even though dancing isn't something our particular Christian tradition has explored too much. Using our bodies in worship is certainly something this psalm invites us to consider.

We also praise God with words in song: not only the orchestra but also “everything that has breath” praises the Lord. Vocal worship expresses in words what the sighing and soaring instruments profess. So the drums start off and the orchestra repeats while dancers and singers take their places. The whole body, the whole voice, and the whole community join in symphonic praise. And the worshippers play and sing their hearts out over God's greatness. The music lifts heads, moves hearts, softens spirits, and enlivens minds. Worshiping God in song reorients us to the true soundtrack of our lives.

Did you know it's physically good for us to sing? Researchers have been learning more about this over the past couple of years. Using our vocal cords in song stimulates our vagus nerve, the longest nerve in the body. That nerve connects our brains to our spinal cords and branches off into our vital organs. When we sing, we strengthen this nerve complex that helps our bodies rest and relax and recover from stress. A cheerful heart, one that's expressed in song, really is good medicine.

That benefit for us isn't our motive for praising God, but it is certainly another reason to notice and praise God's goodness. Our good God commands things that are good for us! So it's no surprise that we actually do feel uplifted, body and spirit, when we praise him in song.

Romans 12:1 reminds us that sung praise on Sunday is a pointer toward the way we offer our whole selves to God on Monday. “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.” The hallelujah comes out of our mouths and goes with us every day of the week.

We've talked about why and how. Now let's explore WHO is doing the praising. Psalm 150:6 says, “Let everything that has breath praise the Lord.” That “everything” certainly includes human singers. But “everything” also reminds us that so much more praising of God is happening than what we can see. The heavenly hosts and animal kingdom are praising God too. Our offering of human praise connects us to what is happening behind the curtain all the time in other realms in heaven and on earth.

John's vision in Revelation 5 echoes the testimony of the psalms about who worships. It calls to mind “the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders in a loud voice they were saying: “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!” Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, saying: “To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!”

So far I've spoken about joyful praise, that's the spirit and essence of Psalm 150. But I'm also very aware that for many of us, praise doesn't or hasn't always come easy. Exuberance is out of the question. Depending on what you're living right now, hearing about joyfully praising God might turn your stomach. Joy

might not be where you are. So what's the direction of Psalm 150 for you? Are you supposed to paste on a smile and praise the Lord through gritted teeth? Choke sound out around the lump in your throat? If you've been at LaGrave for the summer series you know that confessing sin, lamenting tragedy, calling for justice, telling about God's work in history, despairing and hoping, all of these human experiences are collected and offered to God in the psalms. Tears are welcome in worship.

But I also want to point out the direction of the psalms. The painful psalms, the lament psalms, show up more frequently toward the beginning of the book. Psalms of praise are more numerous toward the end. Isn't that interesting? If the shape of the book went the other direction. If more psalms of praise were at the beginning of the book and more laments were at the end we might discount the weight of the praise, believing it oversimplified or without life experience. Or maybe if the psalms ended in lament we'd just close the whole book in despair.

But the direction of the psalms isn't a downward spiral from praise to lament. It goes through lament to praise, up and to the right! It's as if the hymnbook arranger, guided by the Holy Spirit, was saying, "Yes. Laments are part of life. Pain claws deep. But the laments are not the last word. Lament is not the last word. Who you are, and who God is redeeming you to be, is more than this pain. The last word of your life is praise." When we stumble through pain toward praise, we offer God our broken hallelujahs. And as we sing those first halting notes, we begin to sing with what someone somewhere has called a "second simplicity." A "second simplicity" in praising God wraps up not only our joy but also our sorrow. A "second simplicity" means "even now" praise. "Even now" we raise our broken hallelujahs because it's still true: God is faithful. We praise God now not with the fresh bloom of first love, but with a love whose storm-battered trunk still has deep roots. We say, "Let everything that has breath praise the Lord."

At creation, God scoops up some dirt, breathes air into the first humans, and they become living beings. At redemption, Jesus breathes his last for us and our salvation. The breath we have is the one received gift we have to offer God when all else is gone. We breathe in the life he gives; and breathe out our praise.

In his dying breath, Jesus defeats the power of Satan, sin, and death. In his rising breath he calls us into his gracious reign for all eternity. So all our lives we keep sending our exuberant and broken hallelujahs toward God. One day, sooner than we know, we will join with the angels and all God's people in the throne room of heaven, singing Hallelujah, salvation and glory, honor and power to the Lord our God. Amen.

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