

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
First Sunday after Christmas
December 26, 2004

Embracing Praise
Jeremiah 31:7-14; Ephesians 3:3-14

Our readings of scripture today have to do with giving praise to God.
They are texts of celebration, chosen for the Christmas season,
in part, because they are exuberant outpourings of joy,
the joy of God's people, and God's own joy.

In addition to being texts of celebration and praise,
they also share another common theme:
the theme of gathering; the glorious gathering of God's people;
in Jeremiah, it is the homecoming of the Exiles;
in Ephesians, it is God's plan for the fullness of time,
to gather up all things in him,
things in heaven and things on earth.

The proximity of these two themes:
the bringing together of praise and gathering in the scripture
reveals to us something about who God is,
and about what praise really is.

First, if I'm going to preach about praising God, I need to make a confession.
Praise, for me, has been one of the least attractive forms of prayer in my spiritual life.
I have often felt a little guilty that I don't feel more inclined to praise God,
and don't get a real rush of emotion from praise language.
I see the Charismatics waving their hands and weeping out their songs,
but that doesn't really do it for me.
And while I do feel, quite often, a sense of inspiration in our hymns of praise,
or in the anthems sung and played by our choirs,
I think that has more to do with listening to a great piece of music
than with anything that's happening in my relationship with God.
I have tended to be more comfortable with
thanksgiving, or confession, or asking, or dedicating, than with praise.

But in studying these texts, I think I may be on to a discovery
that opens a door for me, to – well – enjoy praising God more.

For years, I think I've been praising God with a distorted image in my mind.
Praise, in the language scripture and of our worship,
is often associated with worshipping a king.
Problem is, we have a fairly negative image of kings in this country,
being founded only a few hundred years ago after liberating ourselves

from the oppression and neglect of the British crown.
We Americans prefer Presidents instead of Kings;
elected officials whom we might hail, or applaud, or even cheer for;
whose hand we would be honored to shake,
but to whom we would never bow, let alone prostrate ourselves.

But since praising God is associated with worshipping a king,
I get this image in my mind of God the King on the throne
and me prostrated before God, doing the hands up and down,
in the “we are not worthy” kind of motion.

Now, to be sure,
there are many scriptures which would place us in this posture before God.
One of the most famous is the call of Isaiah, in Isaiah 6,
when the prophet has a vision of God, sitting on the throne, high and lofty,
his glory filling the temple, causing even the angels to hide their faces.

And Isaiah’s response is to cry:

*Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips,
and I live among a people of unclean lips;
yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!*

This is the quintessential “We are not worthy” kind of prayer.
It is a confession of un-holiness in the presence of perfect holiness.

But in today’s readings from Jeremiah and Ephesians,
we get a different picture of the God we’re praising,
and, I think, a different posture for praise as well.

In this passage from Jeremiah, praise is not linked to fear, woe, or unworthiness;
instead it springs up from the gladness and celebration of the people.
The Lord has declared that he will gather the Exiles from the farthest parts of the earth,
and will lead them home:

Associated with the command to give praise
we get words like gladness, consolations, goodness, and dance
verbs like rejoice, sing aloud, raise shouts, be merry, be satisfied.

Probably the most poignant image of God here is that of a shepherd,
gathering Israel like a flock.

It was quite common in those days to liken the King to a Shepherd for the people,
providing for the flock and protecting it from danger;
a more tender image than Isaiah’s intimidating throne room.

Turning to Ephesians, we hear the repeated words
*to the praise of God’s glorious grace,
for the praise of God’s glory,
to the praise of God’s glory.*

And here the language is of our adoption as God’s children,
and the good pleasure of God in bestowing blessings on us,

and the gathering up of all things to God, in the fullness of time,
and the great inheritance God plans to give to us,
God's adopted children.

Reading these passages this time around got me thinking about my notions of praise,
that perhaps they are a little flat, a little one-dimensional and unimaginative.
Perhaps yours are, too.

Our mental images of God in our prayer life could be greatly enriched
by meditating on these passages of scripture, and on our praise.

Consider for a moment what other genuine experience of giving or receiving praise
you have had.

One that comes to mind is last week's Christmas cantata.

I expect that most of us who came out of the sanctuary praising not only God
but also the choir and the instrumentalists and the readers,
were doing so because we were *genuinely uplifted and inspired* by the experience.

It was probably not primarily an experience of feeling unworthy
in the presence of such talent,
even though most of us out here couldn't sound that good
no matter how hard we might try.

We praised the cantata, not because we felt inferior,
but because we felt a special connection with the music and the story it told.

The other experience that comes to my mind
is that of receiving homemade cards from my daughter.

At age 7, Langley is quite a little artist, and she loves to make cards.

At least once a week, if not several times a week, I receive a card praising me for being
"the greatest dad" or "the best dad" or "her special daddy"
(that's on the *good* days, of course!)

And often on the inside of the card there are a few reasons listed
for my special recognition:

"You take care of us"

"You put band-aids on our boo-boos"

"You hug us when we are crying"

"You read to us at night"

I don't think I've ever receive a card saying I'm the best dad because

"you are always right and we are usually wrong"

"you make the rules that we have to follow"

"you have the power to take away our toys if we don't clean up our rooms"

Langley's cards are an expression of adoration and connection rooted in a mutual love.

So, here's the gist of what I'm saying:

Praise is not a *distancing* action

a bowing to the throne, intoning "we are not worthy, we are not worthy."

(That may be an appropriate action at times before God,

but it's more akin to confession than to praise.)

Praise, rather, is an *embracing* action.

In praise, God and humanity embrace one another.

In praise, both God and humanity are affirmed, celebrated and enjoyed.

God, for God's holiness, goodness, and steadfast love,

and humanity, for our great value and beauty in God's eyes.

Praise comes from having *grace* and the *riches* of heaven *lavished on us*.

Praise involves God's people in *shouting aloud*,

[like some do when Jerome Bettis lunges into the endzone – a sort of exulting!]

Praise comes from being *consoled* and *protected* and *gathered in* and brought *home*.

Praise means being *radiant over the goodness of the Lord*,

over the grain, the wine, the oil, the herd, the watered garden.

Praise draws people into dancing and singing and merrymaking.

Praise transforms mourning into joy and sorrow into gladness.

It may sometimes evoke that warm sleepy feeling you get

after enjoying your favorite Christmas dinner.

Thus, the Westminster Larger Catechism gets it quite right when it says

the chief end of humankind is

“to glorify God and *fully to enjoy* God forever.”

Praise and the enjoyment of God:

these are not distancing actions,

they are embracing actions, acts of special connection, acts of love.

In closing, I'd like to share with you a prayer that has helped me to praise.

If you were in attendance at Heinz Chapel, at the Wedding of Suheir and Robb Pfeil,

you may have done this with me then.

Please stand with me.

[BEGIN WITH HANDS TOGETHER]

[OPEN HANDS TO GOD; LIFT YOUR FACE TOWARD HEAVEN]

We open ourselves to God; reaching out to receive and be received;

like an infant who cannot yet walk, reaching up to be lifted to the parent.

We commune with God and are satisfied by God's bounty;

we are filled with the lavish riches of God's grace;

and the warmth of God's love,

for God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God

and God abides in them.

[BRING HANDS DOWN TO CROSS YOUR BODY]

Rest in the embrace of God's great love for us, a love that will never let us go;

a love that says *Come to me, you who labor and are heavily burdened,*

and I will give you rest...rest for you soul

As we rest in Christ, and in his Spirit, we abide in God's love.

And in the security of God's powerful love, we are set free to love the world God loves...

[SO NOW OPEN YOUR HANDS TO GOD'S WORLD]

Abiding in the love of God, we are set free to love our family, our friends, our neighbors,
even those whom we have considered our enemies,
but who are also loved by God.

As we extend love to others, we return our love to God.
[SO LIFT YOUR HANDS ONCE MORE TO GOD]

Pour out your adoration and praise; bask in God's light;
be surrounded by God's Spirit; be filled with the breath of life.

[RETURN YOUR HANDS TO YOUR CENTER, TO YOUR SOUL]
In the love of God and of God's world, we become who we were created to be.

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This is a prayer of praise: a prayer of divine and human embrace.
To pray this way, and consequently to live this way
is to enjoy God fully.

This is the way of life to which we are called
in this season of good cheer, glad tidings, and great joy.

May the Spirit of Christmas,
the Spirit of praise and adoration
abide with you today and always.
Amen.