

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
First Sunday after Christmas
December 28, 2008

Praise-Fest

Psalm 148

Psalm 148 is just the right Psalm for the Sunday after Christmas
and the last Sunday of the calendar year.
It is hard to imagine a more majestic Psalm of Praise.

The Psalmist paints for a picture
depicting all creation,
everything in heaven and on earth,
united in a single voice singing praise to God!

The wonderful thing about the Psalms (and all the scriptures really)
is that they are always the same,
and yet slightly different every time you read them.
That's because every time you read a Psalm,
you have changed somewhat,
you are a slightly different person.
This is what makes the Psalms an endless resource of spiritual expression.

I've read this Psalm countless times in my life,
but on reading it this time,
something new stood out to me in a different way.

That last verse, verse 14,
*He has raised up a horn for his people,
praise **for** all his faithful,
for the people of Israel who are close to him.
Praise the LORD!*

Does this mean God is raising up the people's praise for them?
That doesn't make sense – unless God is praising God's self,
which would seem a little mechanical,
making the people a bit like robots.

Is God raising up the praise of all creation for God's people?
Possibly.

Or could it mean that God is returning the praise of the people,
by praising the people for being who they are called to be?

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This got me to thinking...

What is the point of our praise?

And how does God receive our praise?

Given the many and various gifts and abilities of humankind,
in art and science and literature and architecture
and athletics and music and mathematics and philosophy,
and in human relationships, in family life, as working communities,
in exploration of the earth and of space,
the power of imagination expressed in a million different ways –
and every gift arising out of the One Source,
the Source of all life and power and human ability –

Given the miraculous masterpiece of God's hand that we are
are we simply destined to stand still,
or bow down on our knees,
around a throne on which God sits impassively
basking in our endless words and songs of adulation.

Is that ultimately why God created us?

For that scene in the heavenly throne room?

All of human history – or for that matter
all of interstellar and planetary and evolutionary prehistory –
all culminating in one, final and eternal state
of bowing before a great light
and fanning with our hands this great mass
of brilliant fire and smoke and lightning
emanating from a throne?

I don't mean to be disrespectful,

but wouldn't God the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit,
the Creator of all worlds,

get a little bored of all this constant flattery?

I mean, after several million eons?

This summer, at Gethsemani Abby,

a woman of the Roman Catholic tradition
shared her disillusionment with the image the mass evoked for her,
a picture of Jesus lounging on the throne of heaven,
his work accomplished,
his arm thrown over the back of the great chair,
and one leg crossed over the other,
saying (hands out),
"Here I am – aren't I great – come worship me!

The picture didn't fit with her image of the earthly Jesus,
who was anything but egocentric or self-absorbed.

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So with these questions in mind let's consider Psalm 148.
This is a magnificent psalm
not because of the simple repetition of the word "Praise"
(which occurs 13 times)
but because of the vast array of created things
that are doing the praising.

The Psalm calls forth our imagination of all the wide universe
bending like an arc toward its Source,
the Creative Power at the center of all things.
We see the brilliant beauty of sun and all heavenly bodies,
and we are literally star-struck.
We feel the immensity of the mountains as they rise up before us.
We witness the power of the hurricane, the fury of a hailstorm,
the beauty of a fresh blanket of snowfall.
We stand before an immense ocean,
its mighty waves held in check before the dry land.
We taste the sweet fruit of summer,
and try to wrap our arms around a giant redwood tree.
We see a herd of bison charge across a vast prairie,
and watch the majestic flight of an eagle.
We behold the glory of human achievement,
the beauty and uniqueness of a human face.

It is the offering of all these amazing, created things,
the turning of all creation
toward the face and hands and heart of their Creator
that lifts this Psalm into its majestic heights.
It is these created beings
being what they were created to be
that is the voice of this Psalm of Praise.

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In this scene of praise,
God may be sitting on a throne,
if you'd like to think of God that way,
but God could in no way be the passive recipient of
the breathtaking splendor of this adulation.
No – this is no hardened tyrant on the throne;
no calloused despot, toughened up by eons of ego-stroking,

this is no heartless dictator,
no gluttonous fat-cat, stuffed to the point of nausea,
with the praises of his subservient people.

This is the adoring parent sitting at the music or dance recital,
face beaming at the beauty of their child's performance.

This is the pride of the father cheering in the stands,
watching his son's homerun sail over the fence.

(Note that I said cheering in the stands,
not flailing around on the sidelines, hurling negativity toward his son,
and everyone else,
or using his child to stroke his own ego,
and live out his own unachieved childhood fantasies –
there is a difference!

No, God is the good father,
who has worked through his achievement issues
without projecting them onto his children! ☺)

The heart of God receiving our praise
is the joy of a mother watching her daughter being fitted
for a wedding dress;
it is the joy of the father in presenting his daughter for marriage,
or of a grandfather holding his first or 15th grandchild in his arms.

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When I was in grade school,
we used to have this little trick we used
when someone threw an insult our way,
or made some cutting remark,
or even just a friendly little jab.

We would hold up our hands in a "C" or a horseshoe shape.
We'd either just hold it up, or sometimes give a little swipe of the finger,
and say "*Back-at cha!*"
...meaning whatever comment, sentiment, or gesture
was just sent our way,
we were sending it right back to the person who sent it.

In a more rare and mature moment, probably after we were a little older,
we might use "*back-atcha!*" to return a compliment.

This image came to me the other day,
not in the silly grade-school way,
but in a more profound, heavenly, glorious way

in a more deeply theological way.

I was driving home after dark,
through the near the procession of Christmas lights
along Mt. Royal Boulevard and Scott Avenue.

As I drove,
I was listening to the final movement of Handel's Messiah,
"Worthy Is the Lamb".

The text is taken from the 5th chapter of Revelation,
a scene from the throne room of God,
and upon the throne is Christ, the Lamb of God.

The ones who worship are,
first, the four living creatures that surround the throne,
and the 24 elders.

And after they begin their praise,
they are joined by the voices of many angels,
myriads upon myriads, thousands upon thousands,
and finally, joined with them,
is the voice of every creature in heaven, and on earth,
and under the earth, and in the sea, and all that is in them,
and they are singing
*"Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power,
and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory,
and blessing...be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne,
and unto the Lamb for ever and ever."*

And at that moment in my car, listening to this majestic piece of music,
surrounded by little lights shining in the darkness,
I saw Jesus rise up from the throne,
and he put out his arms as wide as he must have stretched them
on the cross;
and he was giving all the universe and every creature
the greatest,, most glorious and divine "back-acha"
that there ever was.

And this brilliant light that emanated from the praises of all creation
and shone on the face of Christ,
suddenly began to return in an explosion of light
that rained over all those giving praise
so that we all were enveloped in a great feast
of light and praise.

And each creature stood tall, or stout, or gracefully,

each reflecting all the beauty and goodness
for which it was created.
And God rejoiced in the creation and praised it back.
*God has raised up a horn for the people,
praise for all the faithful,
for the people...who are close to him.
Praise the LORD!*

So, with our eyes now drawn to heaven,
through the simple beauty of the crèche, and the cross,
and the Christmas greens,
let us join with all creation in the praise of God,
and as we do,
behold the Lamb of God, with arms outstretched for you,
returning your praise in loving adulation for you,
the children of God,
the people destined for eternal glory
in the presence of our Beloved Creator.