

The Power (& Purpose) of Praise
Psalm 148
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I usually don't listen to music on the radio on Sunday morning, but last week, I hadn't changed the station to NPR yet, and these words from a Commodore's song filled my car; "easy like Sunday morning!" I laughed out loud as I thought, "What is easy about Sunday morning!" Which of these can you identify with: it's Sunday morning, parents turn off the annoying alarm, and instead they press the snooze button. The alarm goes off again; again the parents press the button for a few more minutes of sleep. Finally, a third time, and now they're late! Time to get the kids up, they all rush around, getting dressed, throwing down breakfast in the car...they pull up, the kids hop out of the car, yay, they're still on time, the game hasn't started yet, the team is just taking the field!

Or this one, it's Sunday morning. The week has been horrendous, not a free moment to be found...you're exhausted...you say to yourself, I just need some time to catch my breath, ...I'll linger here with a pot of coffee and the paper. Or this one, it's Sunday morning...a gorgeous day. The sun is out...everything is in bloom. Taking the bike out for a ride would be a great way to begin the day...enjoying nature...exercising the body...clearing the mind! Or this one, it's Sunday morning and just like any other day, it's hard to get going...the "ol' body" just doesn't move like it use to...!

Now there's nothing wrong with any of these scenarios, they're a realistic part of our lives. In our multi-faith society, where the Sabbath day can be either one on the weekend, Sunday mornings now are regularly scheduled as much as Saturdays with sports activities for children and youth. And for many people, our lives are so busy, that it seems we hardly have time to catch our breath...so we take whatever we can get...for some, that is often a Sunday morning. And for many of us, exercising outdoors is "worship" as we enjoy with the beauty of God's creation. Recognizing these realities, this morning, we look at Psalm 148, as it has something to say to us. Psalm 148 is an invitation. An invitation for all creation, no matter who we are or what we are, no matter what our circumstances; to praise God; the first six verses inviting the heavens, the last eight inviting all the earth. Before we look at "R.S.V.P. ing" to this invitation, let's put it in context, and then look at what it means, in terms of problems, purpose and power.

First, its context; Psalm 148 is in the middle of the last five psalms, which are a doxology to the whole book of Psalms. Doxology comes from the Greek, *doxa* meaning glory and *logos* meaning word, so literally meaning, "glory word" or "glory speaking." The book of Psalms, as we know, is the "hymnbook" of Scripture. And scripture, from the beginning in Genesis through the end of Revelation, praises God, gives God glory! In Genesis we learn that we, human beings are not apart, separate, from creation, but we are a part of creation. In Revelation, we hear the songs of praise that a new heaven and a new earth, a new creation will come in Christ, that we are also a part of. In Psalm 148, we are invited to let our praise join with the praises of all creation.

That's all well and good, but there are problems, in order to praise God we have to accept the truth that there is One worthy of praise. This problem has two parts. First, we have to see that we are not the ones worthy to be praised. This humble acceptance of ourselves as a part of creation can be challenging. We work hard to be the best we can be. To live the best way we

know how. And it's tempting to take the credit ourselves; maybe not praise exactly but something more like...pride. Scripture warns us against this. Psalm 8 puts us in our place; "O Lord, our God, what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you take care of them." And of course, Scripture tells us that God is worthy to be praised. From "great is the LORD and most worthy of praise; [Psalm 145:3] to You are worthy, our LORD and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being" [Rev. 4:11].

Even if we do accept that truth about ourselves, and about God, there are some of us who still struggle with the problem of pure adoration of another. Patrick Miller, an insightful, faithful professor I had at Princeton, defines praise this way: "Praise is language to God and about God, elicited out of the human experience of God."¹ Now this is not our usual, working definition. Praise for us is often a word of commendation or approval. And psychologically, we often praise others to re-enforce a behavior we want to encourage. For example, we might praise a child for good grades or being active in sports to encourage the child to continue those behaviors. But that kind of praise doesn't cross over to praising God...we don't praise God for our good health or wealth to encourage God to keep giving us good health or wealth! We praise God because we accept who we are, and because we affirm that God alone is worthy of praise. Miller also says, "Praise more than any other act fully expresses utter devotion to God and the loss of self in extravagant exaltation of the transcendent Lord..."²

The purposes of praise are also two-fold. The purposes of praise are to respond to God's working in our lives: giving witness to God's grace and love. Responding and witnessing; even if others haven't experienced God's presence in their lives, our praise witnesses to God's presence."³ We are challenged here as well. As we saw in the scenarios at the beginning of this sermon, many things get in our way of responding and witnessing to God through praise. Our schedules, our daily lives, even our taking God for granted, yes, we can and do worship God in other places, but praise and worship of God is the purpose of this place, and others like it. The ball field has another purpose, time with the paper has another purpose, exercising in nature has another purpose! That doesn't mean, praising God doesn't happen in those places, we know it does. It just recognizes that those places have another primary purpose. The primary purpose of this place is to praise God! That doesn't mean that all who come into this place, this sanctuary, come for the purpose of praising/worshipping God...but that is why this place is here, this is why we gather on a Sunday morning!

But we may ask ourselves, what difference does it make if I go to church, if I worship God, if I offer my praise to God. What difference does it make if I answer the R.S.V.P. to the invitation to praise God with a "yes?" The difference, praising God changes us! That's the mysterious power of praising God, this kind of praise changes us! It's not why we praise God, but it's like the "party favor" of responding yes, God's favor, grace, poured out upon us because we said "yes" to the invitation to praise. We offer to God something only we can offer: our praise. And that transforms us, changing us in mind and spirit, as the Creator continues to re-create us. And as we offer our part, our praise, with others offering their parts, their praise, in our diversity of praise, for praise is different for different people, we unite with all creation, becoming a part of the new creation in Christ.

Sunday mornings are not easy. But neither are Monday mornings, or Tuesdays, or Saturdays. Our lives are complicated and many things compete for our attention. We make daily decisions that can have life-time consequences, but the Good News is another invitation will

always be extended because the Host of the Feast wants the banquet hall to be filled with the joyful noise of people, people praising God!

1. Miller, Patrick D. *Interpreting the Psalms* Fortress Press 1986, page 64
2. *Ibid*, page 67
3. *Ibid*