

“The Power of Praise”

Psalm 100

May 22, 2011

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Our text for today is Psalm 100, one of our favorite thanksgiving and praise psalms.

*Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.*

*Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing.*

*Know that the Lord is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.*

*Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name.*

*For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.*

Thanks be to God for this reading from scripture.

As we read this psalm together we are praising God. I believe, as do many others, that when we praise God, we are transformed both as individuals and as congregations. The theologian Walter Brueggemann maintains that after having praised God with our whole heart, our lives are reordered and we leave the sanctuary and return to the world newly aware that we do not have to be part of the world as it is.

We do not have to accept many of the values celebrated by the world. We question the importance of seeking power, wealth, and fame. After having praised God we can imagine an alternative life style which, for example imagines a life less turned in upon itself and its own needs. We can become more sensitive to the needs of our neighbors. Brueggemann goes so far as to say that when we praise God, we are transformed into what he calls “world makers”, people who in their own various ways however small have the power to transform the world. ways have the power to transform the world.

Before we look more closely at psalm 100, let’s understand what praise is and what it is not. We do not praise God because God needs our praise. As a teenager I used to wonder about this God that seemed to me so hungry for us to bow down in reverence. I used to imagine God as behaving like Mother Nature did in an ad for margarine that was popular in the 70s. . Mother Nature would come on stage with flowers in her hair looking all peaceful and beautiful. The narrator would offer her a taste of something in a spoon, and she would say, “Oh that is lovely butter.” The narrator would then say “Oh no! that’s not margarine, that’s butter!” Mother nature would then become **furious** and raise her arm causing lighting bolts to shower down and storms to blow. She would then say, “It’s not nice to fool Mother Nature!”

Well, this is what I thought God was like. If you didn't do everything to make God happy, you or someone you loved was going to be punished. As we know, this is a false notion of praise.

As I got older, I realized that the God we worship is a loving God, a provident God who wants only good for us. As our psalm says, "For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations." We praise God because we are overwhelmed by God's goodness and love. We praise God because, as the old hymn says, "we cannot keep from singing."

Praise is thanksgiving, but it is more than thanksgiving.

When we praise God we move into another space. I call it "praise space." There we catch a glimpse of God's glory and find ourselves in awe. We may not be able to express our feelings in words, but we know it has happened, and we know we have been changed because of it.

I want to show you 3 pieces of art that show the power of praise.

The first is Ruben's portrait of David praising God and playing the harp. The fact that nearly half the psalms are ascribed to David is testimony to the regard in which the great singer of Israel was held. Evidence indicates that the Psalms are the product of many minds during many centuries.

The second is David leading the Ark of the Covenant back to Jerusalem after it had been in the possession of Israel's enemies. I show this slide to indicate the crowds that would gather for ceremonies of thanksgiving and praise. Many of the psalms would be sung as part of the people's procession to the place of worship.

The third is a Stained glass work portraying women playing either tambourines or hand drums (timbrels). They are dancing and would have been part of a procession in Old Testament worship.

At the outset, I said that the giving praise to God could be life changing for us. Consider this line:

**Know that the Lord is God. It is he that made us, and we are his.**

"Know" as it is used here is really a command. Choosing a god to worship in Old Testament times was a very serious business because there were many gods available to be worshipped. You may recall that in the book of Judges, Joshua gathers the tribes of Israel together and commands them to make choose whom they will worship.

*"Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites*

*in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.”  
(Joshua 24: 14-15)*

It made a difference whether you served Baal or Ashtoreth a fertility goddess, or whether you worshipped Yahweh, a god of love, a god who said you must treat each other fairly, and a god who was a faithful shepherd.

It made a big difference to those in Old Testament times which god they chose to worship, and it makes a big difference to us today. Like them, we also have many gods to choose from other than the God revealed to us in Jesus Christ. We are tempted daily by the gods heralded by advertising and the ethos of our culture. We are regaled by the god of youth, the god of fine clothes, the god of success, of god of fine cars, the god of getting ahead, the god of power and fame. If we follow these gods, we can easily be led to cynicism, anxiety, pride, and the need to dominate others. Just like the people in Joshua’s time, we need to choose whom we will serve.

If we choose to praise God, how we choose to praise God is often a very individual matter. We don’t all praise God the same way. I love the drums, and the drum circle we had this morning. I became hooked on drumming as a way of praise when I heard an Inuit Pastor speak, a man who was a member of the native Alaskan population. I heard him tell of the use of drums in their funeral services. He explained that after a funeral service the drums would gently beat, and the people would slowly dance, and continue dancing long into the night. The beat of the drums echoed their own heart beat. This was their way of praising God. It was also a way of connecting to themselves, to the earth, and to each other.

I also love our exodus band here at Covenant. I respect Steve Royalton’s sincere love of God and of helping young people experience the awe and majesty of God by playing music meaningful to them, music that expresses their way of praising God.

Would I want this to be the only way I praise God? Of course not. I’m of an older generation. I am still brought to tears by the old hymns and music, music which does not hold the same emotional treasure chest for many others as it does for me. I still tear up when we sing “How Great Thou Art.” The reason I tear up is because I remember my grandmother playing the Billy Graham worship hour on the radio when I was a little girl and hearing George Beverly Shea singing it. It connects deep in my heart with the love my grandmother had for me. I later realized that her love was an indication of the kind of love God has for me and for us all. I believe that this kind of love is worthy of my awe and praise.

I used to try and get Sam, our former organist to let us sing “How Great Thou Art” more often in worship, and he would shiver in horror. Only when I would tell him it was my grandmother’s favorite hymn would he relent. Sam found other music was his way of praising God.

In spite of the different ways we praise God, there was one service here at Covenant when I remember that we were all of one spirit. It was after 9/11 and we came together that week for a service of lament. The church was full, people came who we hadn’t seen in years.

We sang “America the Beautiful” asking for God’s grace to be shed on our country and all people. I recognize suddenly that our service that evening was not only a service of lament, but it was also a service of praise because we realized we were helpless and were turning to God. We acknowledged our need to bow our heads and admit how little we were, and how great was our God. We were praising God by showing our need for our God whose “faithfulness continues to all generations. Our God would not leave us bereft.

I suspect that we all left that night somehow different than when we had arrived. Perhaps we left, knowing that in some small way we had experienced the transforming power of our God and took heart that in some small way we could be “world makers” in the midst of our hurting world.

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*For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations*

Thanks be to God. Amen