

Why Praise?

Text: Psalm 146

A sermon preached by Rev. Julie Emery

At the Larchmont Avenue Church

June 6, 2010

*Praise the LORD!*

*Praise the LORD, O my soul!*

*I will praise the LORD as long as I live;*

*I will sing praises to my God all my life long.*

*Do not put your trust in princes,*

*in mortals, in whom there is no help.*

*When their breath departs, they return to the earth;*

*on that very day their plans perish.*

*Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,*

*whose hope is in the LORD their God,*

*who made heaven and earth,*

*the sea, and all that is in them;*

*who keeps faith forever;*

*who executes justice for the oppressed;*

*who gives food to the hungry.*

*The LORD sets the prisoners free;*

*the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.*

*The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;*

*the LORD loves the righteous.*

*The LORD watches over the strangers;*

*he upholds the orphan and the widow,*

*but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.*

*The LORD will reign forever,*

*your God, O Zion, for all generations.*

*Praise the LORD!*

+++

It was a retreat just like any other. We had spent the day together, playing, learning, joking. And now we were a diverse gathering of young teenagers milling about before dinner. There was a Great Room connected to an eating area where food was being set out and we were being called over to the tables for dinner. As we started to move toward the tables our youth pastor said that for

our prayer we would be learning a song passed down throughout the generations, a song that many of us had sung in church or had at least heard a few times. And then he broke into song: *Praise God from whom all blessings flow. Praise God all creatures here below. Praise God above ye heavenly hosts. Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Amen.*

He led us through the song step by step – we followed him on each line until we knew it, and then we sung it all together. I don't know what it was about that moment that stuck in my head. Maybe it was the first time I had heard a worship song used as a blessing on a meal and it was surprising – things so familiar taken out of context can transform their meaning. Maybe it was that every time I sang the doxology after that I heard it differently – out of the context of thanksgiving for the blessings that God pours out upon me every day. Maybe it was simply that I had deep love and affection for my youth pastor and appreciation for what he had to teach. But I will never forget those moments as the first time I truly learned the doxology – and I've been singing it ever since.

It is a hymn so short and so familiar that I find it pops out of my mouth at all sorts of different times. Last week at Presbytery a dear friend was examined for ordination on the floor of Presbytery. She is a friend from the Katonah church who I met on our trip to Nicaragua this past winter. Both mothers, we commiserated together during our time in such a far off place – missing our children together and sharing stories of them, sharing stories about what it is like to minister with young children and family in tow, we watched and played with the Nicaraguan children and spoke of our own babies and what it is like to leave them to serve a community of people that might never consider leaving their families in that way.

So when she stood before Presbytery and was asked questions about her call to ministry and what that meant to her – I imagined her two children and her husband standing alongside of her – ever present and with her in this awesome step. When she was approved the entire Presbytery body broke out in singing the doxology. Hearts were full of joy.

I am fully aware that this is not quite as common in the wider world. For a group of clergy it seems an obvious response to a moment of joy: singing words of praise and thanks to God. But what about everybody else? Would you imagine yourself singing at the birth of your child, or the engagement of a friend? Would you imagine yourself singing at the reception of a promotion or a good grade? It's not just any song, though – the song points to God: thanking God for the blessings that we receive. It's a way of noting: this is God's doing, not mine, for no good comes to me except by the grace of God.

The difficulty comes, though, because life is not all blessing. How do we live a doxological life in a world that is seeped in lament and sorrow? How do we praise in a world wounded by war and violence, sick with pain and suffering? Why would anyone praise God in our world?

Why? It does seem strange that God would demand our praise as the scriptures state. It seems like a God of egotism and self-absorption that would ask for us to sing praises even in the face of such a world as broken as ours. It almost seems when we read these psalms in the voice of a sarcastic teen: "We praise you God, cause everybody knows you're soooo great."

But perhaps praise is not about God at all. Perhaps it's not the praise itself that God wants but the result of the praise? That is to say - maybe praise is not an end in and of itself, but a means to an end?

Psalm 146 marks the first in the final section of the Psalter. These last five psalms each begin and end with the words "Hallelu - Yah" - Halleluia, which in Hebrew is: Praise YHWH. "Praise the Lord." The book of psalms is often called "the Hymnbook of the Second Temple," and as we read through each of these poetic hymns it is important to remember that while each stands alone it is also connected to the larger body of psalms.

These hymns of praise are connected to the psalms of lament that come in the beginning of the Psalter, they are connected to the stories of Israel told throughout, and they are connected in a way so that the entire book of Psalms tells a story of the history of Israel; in its beginnings, in its exile and in the period of return and rebuilding.

The Psalms are a way of singing the story of God. It is a telling of God's justice and work in the lives of those who speak it. "The Lord executes justice for the oppressed; the Lord gives food to the hungry; the Lord sets the prisoners free and opens the eyes of the blind...the Lord watches over the strangers, and upholds the orphan and the widow, and brings the way of the wicked to ruin."

It is a doxology that is mindful of the pain and suffering of life. It is a doxology that remembers the forgotten and oppressed. And so in some ways it is a more powerful word of praise than one steeped only in joy without any suffering

What you might note is the present tense of the psalm. You might say, "but the oppressed do not receive justice, the hungry remain so, the prisons are filled, the stranger is sent away at borders and the blind still reach out in darkness." How can we say Halleluia when these words seem like lies?

At a recent seminar on youth and culture in Princeton, professor Rolf Jacobson from Luther Seminary in Minnesota taught a class titled, "How can I keep from screaming, laughing, crying? In it he suggested that we need to teach our children words to use to describe both their every day trials and suffering, and their every day blessings. He said we need to give them language about God to describe their daily lives - and he invoked the psalms.

"Teach them the words of praise," he said, "and then in naming their blessings they might be saturated in a life of gratitude." It is part of the way we help them find meaning in life, by giving them a way to describe the world around them that is God-infused.

The present-tense language of psalm 146 does another thing - it brings us into the actions of God. By singing those affirmations of God's work in the world we become part of the actions of God. We sing "God executes justice" and we become agents of that justice. We sing, " God gives food to the hungry" and we become actors in the preparations of the feast. We sing, "the Lord will reign forever" and we become grateful participants in God's kingdom here on earth.

Praise may not be for God as much as it is for us. Because the effect is that praise changes us; as we name what God has done for us, as we name the blessings in our lives, as we praise God for real things that have happened to us, our gratitude is fused with a knowledge that we are both recipients and agents of God's work in this world.

A life of praise saturates those lives with gratitude and makes every moment shine. Imagine what your life might be - drenched in Halleluias, saturated in praise. May it be so. Amen.