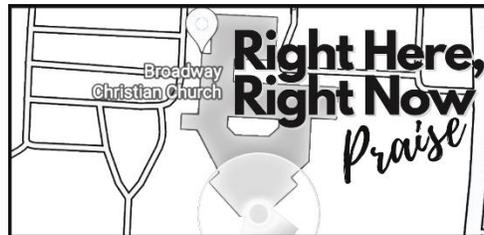




Columbia, Missouri
The Worship of God • December 26, 2021
The First Sunday of Christmastide



The Scripture
Psalm 148

Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD from the heavens; praise him in the heights!

Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his host!

Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars!

Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens!

Let them praise the name of the LORD, for he commanded and they were created.

He established them forever and ever; he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.

Praise the LORD from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps,
fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command!

Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars!

Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds!

Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth!

Young men and women alike, old and young together!

Let them praise the name of the LORD, for his name alone is exalted; his glory is above
earth and heaven.

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!

The Message
“When Praise Carries Over”
Mark Briley

Can you say, “*Praise the Lord!*” this morning?!? The psalmist in Psalm 148 alone says it 13 times... surely, we can say it a second time: “*Praise the Lord?*” (*Praise the Lord!*). This Scripture is chosen on this Sunday – the first Sunday after Christmas – by the Lectionary Committee. The Lectionary Committee is sort of like the College Football Bowl Game Selection Committee – *sort of*. It’s a bit of a stretch, but you get the idea. It’s a committee that has looked at all of Scripture and helped us look at the breadth and width of all our sacred text saying, “*This passage fits this season.*” And Psalm 148 is chosen for the first Sunday after Christmas. Why? Because praise is carrying over from the big event, and this psalm is all about the praise. There has been a game-changing moment... a transformational, sensational, incarnational event and the spirit is soaring. A new baby can have this effect on people.

If you’ve ever had a baby or loved someone who has, you know that the day the baby is born is full of anxious excitement. There’s lots of uncertainty about how it will all go and also the uncanny acceptance that, “*This really happened!*” The day *after* the baby arrives has an excitement all its own. The social media posts of baby with exhausted, but smiling, parents get posted. Grandparents rush to the scene. The hospital banana pudding is more palatable than the day before. There is relief to be on this new side of the expectant journey. While still full of challenge (*and now some new ones!*), the joy spills over and over again from all who enter into the room to catch a glimpse of this new life. The praise is hot, again and again.

We see this in the first Christmas story, too. The shepherds – who never really got invited to anything – got an angelic invite to meet the baby Jesus. Joe is handing out cigars, and Jesus is wearing a royal-purple onesie that says, “*I’m shorty. It’s my birthday. Let’s party!*” So cute. But those shepherds worshipped because they believed something new was happening – something bigger than their world had contained before. *And. They. Praised!*

Luke’s Gospel says that when the shepherds left the manger and headed back to the hills, “*They let loose, glorifying, and praising God for everything they had experienced!*” Have you ever been transformed like that? You were one way, but something happened, and now you’re brand new. You see clearly. You’ve shed the shame, the loss, the past, and you’re ready to embrace what is ahead. When you’re riding that high, nothing can get in the way of your praise and you’re just letting it flow.



You're Akeem in the movie *Coming to America*¹ after his first dance and kiss with Lisa with whom he has fallen in love. His praise carries over into the streets of Queens after his date as he dances his way back to his apartment. He's still singing that song that invited the dance and the kiss. "*Someone to kiss! Someone to miss! When you're away to hear from each day. To be loved (to be loved),*

oh what a feeling to be loved! Some wish to be a king or a queen. Some wish for fortune and fame. But to be truly, truly, truly, truly loved... is more than all of these things..."

And as Akeem sings at the top of his lungs in every elation the gift of love can bring, and he spins and turns and his voice cracks – what is the neighborhood shouting back? A number of colorful versions of the phrase: "*Shut up.*" But his praise cannot be contained. Transformation does this.

Or George Bailey who gets a lot of airplay this time of year. The famous movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*.² George is down and out and ready to end it all until an

intervention – a transformational invitation to see the true impact of his life from an angelic perspective changes everything. And coming back into his own body, his own life, he can't help but praise. And like the Psalmist, he names everyone and everything – people, buildings, inanimate objects – "*Praise the Lord!*" Do you remember his elation?



Click [HERE](#) to open the hyper link to a video clip.

But what happens at the end of that clip? Sometimes when your praise is carrying over, others are looking to block your praise. Some people are just grumpy and want to kill the praise. They may not tell you directly, but they'll complain to other people that you're praising too loud. They tell their whole table at the reception that the DJ is playing all the wrong songs, and it's way too loud. You get it. Sometimes it's just a pride thing and people want to block your praise because they're defensive. They can't

¹ <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0094898/>

² <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0038650/>

get on board with your praising and, in fact, want to squelch it. If they can't dictate how the praise goes; if they can't control it, they don't want any part of it and really don't want you doing it either.

This was King Herod's part in the Christmas story. The wise folks from afar stop by the palace, and they've got gifts, so the king is excited to see them, but then they say, *"These aren't for you. We're bringing them to praise the new King that has been born around here. Have you seen him?"*

Now let's just note, the gifts were nice gestures but certainly not what Mary and Joseph had registered for. What's Jesus going to do with this gold and essential oils? *Diapers. Casserole. Bottle of Wine.* Everyone knows this. But I digress.

They essentially ask, *"You met him yet? Could you point us in the right way?"* Herod says, *"You know I haven't yet. I've been a bit tied up; kinda COVID cautious too... but I plan to go... I plan to praise... if you would just text me when you get there and drop me a pin of his location, I most definitely want to get in on the praise too."*

Herod – you sit on a throne of lies! Probably smelled like beef and cheese. He wants to kill the praise. So, he's prepared to put up a praise block.

Do you ever try to control praise like this? We do like control. I'm not sure I've ever been in a church that didn't have active gang wars over control of the thermostats. Some can't praise God in a sanctuary warmer than 68 degrees, and some don't feel the Holy Spirit until it's 76. You know how this goes. And then we get lost in arguing about details and nuances, and nobody gets to the praise.

I worshipped with the fine people of Eastern Star Baptist Church³ in Indianapolis one Sunday morning as part of a worship class assignment I had while in seminary. We were to go worship with churches of different styles and cultural backgrounds. I had always wanted to hear Jeffrey Johnson preach in person as I listened to him on the radio often in those days (*remember radio? It's all podcast now*). Anyway – had to go to their 7 a.m. service because I was serving in another church at the time as well so needed to go early. I get there by 6:45 a.m., and it's packed, and people are already praising. It was a Psalm 148 kind of church. I loved it. But I'll never forget what Pastor Johnson said about praise blocking that day.

He had been to the car wash that week and got in the long, stagnant line before he realized the line wasn't moving. He was stuck and waiting. *"What in the world is going on?"* he stammered as he was getting a little impatient. One of the carwash staff was

³ <https://www.easternstarchurch.org/>

moving from car to car to share what was happening in front of them and he finally got to Johnson's car. "Sorry, sir." the young man said, "A car got stuck in the middle of the wash... their tire got out of the track somehow and it's stuck pretty good." And Johnson says, "Someone got their tires off the track?" "Yessir." Johnson comes back and says, "You mean to tell me someone got off track and is now keeping the rest of us from getting clean?!?" Oh, and the crowd roared as he said, "Do I have a witness in this place?!" Praise block.

Some people get off track, get self-consumed, get so caught up in how others are trying to praise that they want to control the praise of God. Isn't that something? And this may be our ego getting in the way. We're so enlightened we decide. We've got the truth so sorted through that there's no room for your unique spirit of praise.

Rachel Held Evans, in her work "*How a Girl Who Knew All the Answers Learned to Ask the Questions*" said, "My interpretation can only be as inerrant as I am, and that's good to keep in mind." That's convicted me multiple times. Or as another put it, "Christianity should feel like, "My love for others continues to deepen," not "My beliefs are more correct than everyone else's."

And in this spirit, we try to control the praise. I mean, think about that first Christmas – folks weren't buttoned up in doctrine, they were in awe of a baby who would bring about the long-awaited promise of transformation. Did they have a personal preference about how that transformation would occur – probably. We usually do. But Jesus had already blown up their expectations. The way he came to the world. The people who were invited to be the major players in the whole thing. And Jesus *never* went the orthodox route – always flipping the script, always expanding the possibilities. Can you praise *that* Christ? The one who expands the boundaries of your comfort and control. I hope so as that continued expansion of the boundaries is the reason, we're sitting in a Christian church today. Because until Jesus said, "*We're not going to block the Gentiles from getting in on the praise,*" we weren't invited to the party either.

Lord, forgive me when I've been part of the praise police. Herod is threatened by difference and anxious about disagreement and so he tries to secure his own peace by controlling the praise. When you're consumed with control, you certainly aren't in a spirit to praise.

Dutch priest and author, Henri Nouwen, wrestled with this desire for control and praise in the context of discerning to whom he belongs. He says, "*At issue here is the question, 'To whom do I belong – God or the world?' Many of my daily preoccupations suggest I belong more to the world than God. A little criticism makes me angry, and a little rejection makes me depressed. A little praise raises my spirits, and a little success excites me. It takes very little to raise me up or thrust me down. Often,*" he continues,

*"I'm like a small boat on the ocean completely at the mercy of the waves. All the time and energy I spend in keeping some kind of balance and preventing myself from being tipped over and drowning shows that my life is mostly a struggle for survival; not a holy struggle but an anxious struggle resulting from the mistaken idea that it is the world that defines me."*⁴ This is a life marked by scarcity.

Herod was paranoid in this way. Not enough praise to go around. He was living a zero-sum game. If another was to be praised, then he wouldn't get the praise he wanted. Do you know this spirit? *"In order for me to succeed, you have to fail. For me to look good, you need to look bad. For me to be seen, you need to disappear. In order for me to be celebrated, you need to be separated. In order for me to be recognized, you need to be restricted."* (Villodas).

It's why we quit working together in the realm of politics. It was no longer a *"What is best for America?"* It is *"How can my side win?"* And pretty soon we get lost in envy and comparison and winning and losing... again... clenched fists. Not jazz hands of praise.

Herod was lost in this paranoia. In his day, people would say that *"It is better to be Herod's pig than one of his sons."* Herod killed three of his own sons at the thought of losing his own power, giving up control. We might say, *"That dude was extreme and that ain't me."* I'd like to think that is mostly true. And yet, we've got our own grip on desires for control. We've got our own panic that life is one big *Hunger Games*, and I don't have all I want. We all have that struggle with something that we've said, *"It's my way or the highway,"* something we've not offered to God to redeem with open hands but that we've tucked behind our backs in clenched fists.

This is how we identify our inner Herod. We take note of the times we become so irritable... the times when there's just a disproportionate surge of anger emerging in our spirit. We notice the times when we just become incredibly anxious. In those moments, we may just be trying to hold onto something so tight in fear, in defensiveness; in our desire to control. Jesus is inviting us to open our hands; to live open handed. Because... you can't praise God with clenched fists.

Could Herod have changed? I don't know. Can you and I change? I hope I'm not done growing. I wonder if someone tried to say to Herod the words we may need to hear, too: *"You don't have to live an insecure existence. You are secure in the love of God. You don't have to live a scarcity existence. God is provider. You don't have to be afraid. God is with you."* (Villodas).

⁴ Henri Nouwen. *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. Image Books. New York. 1992.

Maybe this Christmas, you can claim four declarations: just an invitation in the form of declarations. They couldn't be more simple but often simple is what we most need. Pastor Rich Villodas⁵ named these in the spirit we're claiming today; about our inner-Herod's – a declaration that frees us from our passion for control. Herod was invited into this spirit of living but he refused. We have the opportunity today to say, "Yes" if we so choose.

Declaration one: "*I don't know.*" Can you say, "*I don't know.*" There is great freedom in not having all the answers.

Declaration two: "*I need help.*" Say, "*I need help.*" I am not as powerful as I let people think I am.

Declaration three: "*I am loved.*" Say, "*I am loved.*" There's no limit to God's expansive love.

Declaration four: "*Christ is enough.*" Say, "*Christ is enough.*"

That's it. What if Herod lived this way? What if we could live in this freedom? "*I don't know. I need help. I am loved. Christ is enough.*" "*I don't know. I need help. I am loved. Christ is enough.*" When we rest in these declarations, we free ourselves to praise 13 times in a single psalm. We live as a moving billboard of gratitude. "*Merry Christmas, movie house!*" "*To be loved! To be loved. Oh, what a feeling to be loved!*"

We return to our hills... "*Glorifying and praising God for all we have experienced.*" Every praise! Every praise is to our God! And we do this enough... living with open hands... then praise carries over and over and over and over again.

BROAD HEARTS BROAD MINDS BROAD REACH

⁵ Rich Villodas is lead pastor of New Life Fellowship in Queens, NY. He offered these declarations in a message entitled, "*The Light that Overcomes Our Inner Herod.*" Other pieces about Herod shared in this message are indebted to Villodas as well.