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John 20:19-23; Psalm 150

PRAISE!

I feel like I should start with a disclaimer. I know the world is in a world of pain. War, drought, floods, fires, tornados. People are suffering. Family members are hurting. Friends are grieving. Neighbors need help.

We suffer and hurt and grieve – if not for ourselves, then for the people we love. Like Jesus' followers after his death, we might just want to lock ourselves in a room for awhile. Away from all the trouble in the world.

I know that. And, yet. Well, it's the second Sunday of Easter.

In the gospel lesson, it's the evening of first day of the week after Jesus was killed on cross. His closest followers – men, women, children – are at a loss. Hearts shattered. Minds shrouded in the fog of grief. Vague wonderings and unhelpful questions haunt their waking and their sleeping. What if ...? If only

They also do what is helpful when grieving. They gather with others. They tell stories. They share memories. They laugh and they cry.

Lurking beneath the grief is fear: what now? What's next? How do we go on?

Never in their wildest imagination did they think Jesus would appear. Jesus. In their midst. Never mind locked doors. Never mind he was dead. Definitely dead.

Jesus stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."

"The disciples," the gospel reports, "rejoiced."

It's tempting to skip right on by that phrase, to miss the disciples' reactions.

They rejoiced. A smile? A song? A dance? At the very least, a word: Alleluia! Praise be to God!

Like the old Sunday school song: “Al-le-lu, al-le-lu, al-le-lu-ia, Praise ye the Lord.” (*repeat*) Half sing one part, half sing the other. Stand when singing. Sit, stand, sit, stand. Switch parts. Sing again. Laugh at the chaos and confusion. A joyful thing. Alleluia is a joyful word. A word of celebration.

For us, as Christians, it’s an Easter word. Alleluia! Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed, alleluia!

It’s an ancient word. A faith-filled word. From our spiritual ancestors. Repeated, over and over and over again, in the Psalms.

Long before God raised Jesus from the dead, the psalmist proclaimed God’s praise in poetry, in prayer, in song. From the glad note of Psalm 1:1 “Happy are those” to the joyful “hallelujah” and the end of Psalm 150, we are invited to turn to God, to trust God. In happy days and sad. In good times and bad. In the valleys and on mountain tops. Through the best and the worst of life.

Whatever the human emotion – the human situation – it can be found in the book of Psalms. Faith, doubt. Pain, hurt, suffering. Joy, sorrow. Questions. Peace. Delight. If nothing else, the psalmist is honest with God. And, in the end, honest with him – or her – self.

Jesus, on the cross, demonstrated how we might practice that same honesty, a similar humility.

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Sound familiar? It’s Psalm 22.

The psalm continues “Why are you so far from helping me? ... Yet you are holy ... In you our ancestors trusted ... To you they cried and were saved. ... I will praise you.”

I once heard that to say the first line of the psalm is to pray the whole thing. I like that. I also like the questioning of God in Psalm 22. And the recounting of a time when God showed up. And the vivid description of trouble. And how the psalmist trusts God will come to the rescue. And the promise the writer makes to “praise God in the congregation.”

Lament and praise. Together. At the same time.

It’s a common pattern in the Psalms.

It sounds an awful lot like real life.

Richard Bruxvoort-Colligan sums it up well:

“Giving ourselves to praise is not ignoring the suffering in the world. Making big, happy sounds does not mean we’re oblivious to lamentable things.

“In fact, it’s because we live such intensely full-range lives that when there’s something in the world worth celebrating, we jump on it! Not just as individuals, but because we’re connected to gratitude and goodness in the lives of our neighbors, our circle of friends and in the wider world.”¹

To praise God is not to ignore the problems of the world.

To praise God is to say whatever happens, I trust in the maker of heaven and earth. I know God has acted before and will act again. I believe we are not alone. God is with us.

God walks through the dark valleys with us. Is beside us through tough times. Remains near no matter how life ebbs and flows.

To praise God is to celebrate extraordinary gift of life and the promise of life in every day to come.

Praise, according to one commentator, is “the Easter antidote for fear and doubt.”²

Sometimes that’s what we – or at least I – need as much as than anything. An antidote to fear and doubt. A boost of encouragement. A reminder that things will change. Things always change.

There’s another thing I like about this idea of praise and lament together: it’s done in a community of faith. When I’m just not up to the praise, someone will hold me up and praise for me. When I have no words, someone will utter a lament on behalf.

¹ Richard Bruxvoort-Colligan, Patreon post, May 13, 2018.

² Craig A. Satterlee, “Psalm 150, Homiletical Reflection” in *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 2* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 387.

We may not know exactly who we are lifting up. But doing so reminds us that this faith business is done together. We don't need to know the details, God does. That, in itself, is reason to turn to God with gratitude, with praise.

Reminds me of a church camp song:

All God's Creatures Got a Place in the Choir.
Some sing high, some sing lower.
Some sing out loud on a telephone wire.
Some just clap their hands, or paws, or anything they've got now.

In his commentary on the Psalms, James Limburg recounts this story about Psalm 150. It happened

...in a college cafeteria, at one o'clock in the morning, after the annual spring formal dance. The band was packing up. Most of the students had left. A half dozen faculty members were standing around the piano, chatting with the leader of the band. His name was Duke Ellington.

The conversation turned to religion and Ellington's recent sacred compositions. "Would you tell us about your recording of Psalm 150?" someone asked. "Oh, yeah," said the bandleader, and he called to a singer walking by, "Toney Watkins, come over here!" He came, and they gave us their rendition of Psalm 150, Ellington on the piano and Toney Watkins singing the words: "Praise the Lord with the sound of the trumpet!" Ellington looked up from the keyboard and smiled: "And that, my friends, is where Cat Anderson takes off on a marvelous trumpet ride."³

³ James Limburg, *Psalms* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 504.