

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Laura A. Tisher, minister of youth and young adults at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, December 28, 2008, and dedicated to the glory of God!

“Praise”

Psalm 148; Luke 2:22-40

+++++

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

+++++

One day a pastor decided that it is time to sell his beloved horse. He explained to the new owner, "Remember now, to make the horse go, you say, 'Praise the Lord' and to stop, you say, 'Amen.' "

"Okay, I've got it!" the new owner says. Then, when he's ready to leave, without thinking, he instantly says, "Giddy-up" with no result. "Oh yeah. Praise the Lord" he says, and the horse starts off. This is nice, but I'd like to go a bit faster, he says to himself, so out loud, he says, "Praise the Lord," and the horse goes a bit faster. This continues a few more times until he is running along very fast. He turns a corner and discovers that there is a cliff ahead.

"Stop, Whoa, Stop," he says, but nothing happens. "Oh yeah, Amen!" he shouts. The horse stops an inch from the edge of the cliff.

The guy wipes his brow and sighs, "Praise the Lord." A very poor choice of words at that moment!

What is Praise?

Praise is a word that we hear often, but do we really know what it means? Do we really understand its significance for our lives as people of faith? Do we really live lives of praise today, as God is calling us to do?

The word “praise” in Hebrew is *Tehillim*, which is synonymous with the word “psalm.”¹ There are plenty of psalms of lament and complaint in the Bible, more of that kind even than psalms of praise. As a whole, though, the book of Psalms moves from lament and complaint to praise, ending with almost all psalms of praise. Praise becomes the goal – the end result - of the Book of Psalms. By structuring this biblical book in this way, the author was trying to convey the importance of praise in the lives of the faithful. Praise is the goal of human life and of all creation. Praise is fundamental. To praise is to live; to live life fully is to live a life of praise.

When someone does something good, we praise them. We all like to receive praise. Praising is the act of commending, applauding or magnifying. Praising God is lifting up and glorifying God. It is an act of worship. It is an expression of humbling ourselves and centering our attention upon God with heart-felt expressions of love, adoration, thanksgiving and appreciation. The act of praising unites us with each other and with God. It brings us together as a community of faith.

How do we praise?

Praising, according to the Book of Psalms, includes verbal expressions of adoration and thanksgiving, singing, playing instruments, shouting, dancing, lifting or clapping our hands and even being still.

Praise as a lifestyle

But true praise is not merely going through these physical motions. It comes from the heart. Remember when Jesus spoke about the hypocrisy of those whose worship was only an outward show and not truly from the heart? In the same way, genuine praise

¹ McCann, J. Clinton. A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993, pg. 53.

to God is a matter of humility and sincere devotion to God from within.

Praising God involves what happens in worship. But more than that it involves who we are and what we do at every moment. It is a lifestyle – a way of living our lives every day. “Praise is a mode of existence, characterized by openness to God’s instruction.”² All too often, praise to God is something that many people leave at church, an event that happens only here, when we come together with other Christians. However, praise really ought to be much more integrated into our entire lives. Praise ought to take place at work, in the car, at home, anywhere and everywhere we go. Praise is the offering of the whole self to God. Praise involves our core identity and every activity in which we participate. Who we are, as people of God, and what we do are inextricably connected.

Universal Praise

Psalm 148 calls forth praise from all locations and from everyone – from the heavens, the sun, the moon, the stars, the angels, the earth, the sea monsters, fire, hail, snow, frost, wind, mountains and hills, fruit trees and cedars, wild animals and cattle, creeping things and birds, all the people of the earth, of all ages, sexes, and economic and social status. This may seem strange to think of all of these things praising God. How can an object like the moon or something like fire or even trees praise God?! This seems like it must be an imaginary or poetic idea that really cannot be true or factual.

But if we were to dismiss what the writer of the psalm is saying, we would fail to realize the theological significance. The sun, the moon and the stars are all works of God’s creation and by maintaining their place and purpose in the world – by doing what they were created to do – they praise God. By existing and fulfilling their assigned place in creation, they give God – their creator – praise. To praise is to live; to live is to praise God, the creator of all.

² McCann, J. Clinton. A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993, pg. 54.

Praise and Struggle

This call for universal praise from the writer of the psalm comes at a time when the people of Israel were just coming out from exile. Out of their sorrow, the psalmist calls them to sing and dance, shout and clap their hands, for a God that not long before, had seemed to have deserted them. Sometimes it can seem hard to praise God. When nothing seems to be going your way, when it seems like you can't do anything right, it may be hard to praise God. When we think about all the struggle in our world today – with economic hardships, with more and more of our family members and friends going off to war, it may seem difficult to praise God – to give God thanks and to show appreciation. Praise in the face of struggle, though, can in fact be very beneficial and powerful.

Why Give Praise?

Praise brings us closer to God. Praise is an expression of our faith. It declares that we believe that God is with us and plays a role in the outcome of everything that we encounter. For people of faith, praise is an integral part of who we are and how we act out our relationship with God.

Simeon and Anna Give Praise

This was particularly true for two individuals that we heard about in the gospel of Luke this morning. Just days after Jesus was born, Anna and Simeon were in the temple and they both were so excited to see this new baby, to hold him and to celebrate in this new life. There is one tiny phrase in this story that might be easy to overlook, but it tells us so much! Before Anna and Simeon held the newborn baby Jesus or spoke about him to others, both of them did something that is quite notable. They praised God! It was a way of showing their appreciation to God and a way of expressing their faith. Praising God was a fundamental part of their lives. It was something that they always did when they entered the temple. But the scriptures make it clear that it wasn't just an action that they mindlessly did when they came to that sacred place that they knew so well. The praise that they gave God on that day when they first met the baby Jesus was representative of an entire lifetime of living in relationship with God – throughout the good times and the bad.

Contemporary Praise

We are in many ways very similar to both Simeon and Anna. We are connected to them through our faith. They are our ancestors, from whose witness we can learn a lot. Just days after we have celebrated the birth of Jesus, so many years after his actual birth, we read these ancient stories once again. And I wonder, how are we like these people of faith who lived such a long time ago? How do we express our praise to God today? Is praise a fundamental component of our entire lives, or it is something that comes and goes, based on where we are or what we're doing? As we give praise, are we just going through the motions? Are our actions a true expression of our whole identity – who we are and whose we are?

My prayer on this Sunday after Christmas is that our praises might be a true expression of our faith in our God, who has created the entire universe and continues to create and bring about transformation in a world plagued by so much strife. Praise the Lord! Amen.

Copyright 2008, Congregational Church, UCC