

Psalm 150 "Over the Top!" Rev. Janet Chapman 4/24/22

As I look to a time of renewal and reflection in my upcoming sabbatical, I am filled with a great deal of excitement and gratitude for this opportunity you are giving as well as for the Lilly Clergy Renewal program's funding. I'm also grateful this day to be in a church tradition where it is ok to joyfully celebrate, to dare to express outwardly through song, instruments, movement, and humor the miracles of God in our midst. That is not the case everywhere as one Dutch Reformed pastor shared some years back. It was on a particularly cold and snowy Sunday that he had to figure out how to get to his church for worship. All the roads were blocked with heavy snow and he lived some distance outside the village. An idea came to him that he could put on his ice skates and go by way of the canal which ran in front of his church. He questioned whether it was a good idea because his church was filled with very strict and proper folks who would frown on any such frivolous activity on the Sabbath as ice skating. He decided to risk it as it was important that worship be conducted. So he put on his skates and made his way to the church. When he arrived, the official board was waiting for him and no smiles welcomed him. They were obviously disturbed that their pastor had so clearly violated what they felt to be proper behavior on the Sabbath. Yet, they were also uncomfortable because they liked their young pastor and didn't want to cause any rupture in the relationship. After considerable discussion, one of them asked the pastor, "Did you enjoy it?" "No," said the pastor, "I didn't enjoy it." A great sigh of relief went up as they decided he could keep his job.

Yes, I'm grateful that in this church family, enjoyment as a part of God's work on the Sabbath or any other time is not a detriment. So my sabbatical, which comes from the word sabbath, will be filled with much enjoyment as I spend intentional time celebrating all that God

has done and is doing in our midst, without having the constraints of being in charge of that celebration. Today's Psalm is the assigned text for the Sunday after Easter and it is all about unrestrained praise and celebration! In only 6 verses, we learn who, where, and how to praise, the motivation, and the who or what should do the praising. It is the last of the Psalter collection, considered a doxology of doxologies, reiterating over and over the importance of praising God. Every verse includes the Hebrew halleluyah, the plural imperative of the Hebrew verb hallel, to praise plus yah which is a shortened form of Yahweh, God's divine name.

The psalm comes off the page and meets the faithful right where it counts, in the senses. Through a cacophony of instruments, as we heard a sample of during our call to worship, there is no ordinary composition of sounds but a grander scheme. The choice of instruments the psalmist points out such as ram's horn, lute, and trumpet are not a logical combination by any musician's standards. The Psalmist seems to imply that God's surpassing greatness is difficult to miss and defies any certain organizational logic. As Shauna Hannan notes, a number of composers through the ages have tried to help us grasp such musical composition including Bruckner, Britten, Rutter and Franck. Duke Ellington's "Sacred Concerts" series included a number entitled "Praise God and Dance," which was a direct invocation from Psalm 150:4. I know very little of such things but by listening, I learn how musicians have been helpful commentators on the Psalms. Indeed, it is through music that we praise God this Psalm indicates that praising the Lord doesn't need to be a silent endeavor. That isn't surprising since the one we praise is not silent; God continues to speak creation into being.

The Psalmist also highlights that praise can be done through movement of our bodies as Miriam and King David did. If you think there is not much movement or dancing in the church,

compare the sanctuary experience versus the cinema experience. Here there is a lot more movement. Even the stereotypically stiff or shy worshipper is a mover; we enter, we stand, we bow, we sit, we sing, we pray, we eat, we rise, we go forward, we tap our feet, and some of us even clap our hands. Those who are willing to defy logic even dare to sway to the music or shake our booty while singing. Movement is critically important in worship.

There is also the visual element to praising the Lord, something we try to work within sanctuary space, powerpoint, and bulletins. Just 10 years ago, the world was presented with the first handwritten, illuminated Bible manuscript in 500 years called the St. John's Bible out of St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota. Welsh calligrapher Donald Jackson, senior Illuminator to the Queen of England's Crown Office, and his fellow "scribes" have crafted a masterpiece worth experiencing, as seen on the front of the bulletin and enlarged on the screen. This Biblical manuscript takes the centuries-old tradition of craftsmanship and pairs it with the latest computer technology and electronic communication to create an artistic masterpiece. The book on Psalms, which is actually divided into 5 Roman numeral sections, has fewer illustrations than some of the others, yet still the intricacies are stunning. However, with Psalm 150, all subtleties are thrown aside as it is the only Psalm illuminated in all gold leaf, and the text is three times bigger than the others making it dance right off the page. Literally, it visually explodes off the page in praise. Readers are pushed over the top as they gaze at Psalm 150 which completes all 5 sections of the psalms in glorious conclusion.

This psalm is very specific on who should do the praising – you, me, and all that breathes, without limits. It is what is written on the sabbatical banner behind me. Throughout the Psalms, we see indications of the role creation has in relationship to God, namely in exalting

God and all God's works. St. Francis of Assisi understood this relationship better than most as he preached to what Leah Schade calls our Earth-kin, the flowers and the animals, the cornfields and the birds, the forests and the fish. It is our other-than-human family which expands this worshipping congregation out to the surrounding trees, creeks, hundreds of varieties of plants and wildlife, thousands of insects, and microbes we can't even see. Schade names them as brother fern and sister porcupine, brother artic moss and sister dolphin, sister salamander and brother fox; we are surrounded by a choir of cicadas and an altar guild of spiders; we are served by lightning bugs and elder bullfrogs who proclaim God's good news. These are the ones who groan, waiting for those of us to claim our birthright and responsibilities as children of God to finally stand up and say, "Enough" to their environmental abuse. It is to them that we say, "Do not give up on us, O Earth-kin, as some of us try to teach others how to see the world not just from a human point of view but from your point of view and from God's." Tielhard de Chardin writes, "The world is God's body and God draws it ever upward." It is no accident that we are here, that any of us are here, as all that have breath show us anew how to praise the Lord.

There is a story out of the book, The Grace of Dogs, told by Emmanuel Levinas of his time in World War II when he was a POW in a German war camp. He tells of being marched back and forth from prison to the work site, passing the townspeople at gunpoint. Both the guards and townspeople were consumed with hatred towards the prisoners, blind to their humanity, blind to their pain, and intent on forcing them to complete the backbreaking labor. One day, however, on their march back to prison, a dog ran out of the woods and bound up to the prisoners. His tail wagging happily, the dog jumped up to lick their faces, bringing into their

gray world a blur of energy, color and affection. Though the dog had never seen them before, he seemed to recognize them and was convinced they were amazing people. The experience felt like drops of rain on a dry, dusty landscape. The dog reminded them that although broken, they were still human. The dog's sacred joy was a defibrillator to their souls, reawakening them to their true worth and beauty. Even today, we see this happening to Ukrainian refugees and to the many who carry the burdens of physical, social and mental suffering. It is through such divine and often unexpected gifts that we are invited to praise the Lord!

Praise always carries us to an expanded awareness of our true worth and beauty as well as to rejoicing in God's beauty. Psalm 150 pulls out all the stops to push us over the top in praise to the One who surpasses greatness. So, brothers and sisters of all kinds, let us join with our kin in a symphony of unrestrained praise!