

Sermon Prologue/God's Invitation to Praise
Ephesians 1: 3-14, Psalm 150
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We are in the midst of a sermon series on God's invitation to worship and today's focus was and is to be on praise- God's invitation to praise. As the news came out yesterday about the tragic and senseless violence in a Jewish synagogue in Pittsburgh, gunfire directed at God's people, killing eleven worshipping together, I struggled with how inappropriate, how incongruous a sermon on praise might sound in light of that horrific event - not to mention the double homicide in Kentucky and numerous attempted bombings earlier in the week.

I thought of ditching this sermon but an image came to mind of a funeral or memorial service with the family of the deceased loved one singing a hymn, often of praise, singing with voices choking and tears flowing. Of course, some don't choose to sing hymns at a funeral, thinking it is too difficult, and I get that. But for those who do sing, I see it as an act of defiance, a way of proclaiming that the disease and death that took their loved one do not have the last word. Instead, God's grace and resurrection power have the final word.

I think of this sermon and worship service focused on praise in a similar way. I hope you will hear the sermon and experience the worship as our acts of defiance, a way of proclaiming that hatred and evil in the world do not have the last word. Instead, as I shall say in the sermon, praise is our first word and it will also be our final word. Hatred and evil may have their day but ultimately praise of God will carry the day.

Please understand we do not say this because we wear rose-colored glasses and embrace a naïve optimism. We know and have seen how strong evil can be. Nor do we say this as a way of sticking our heads in the sand and denying the evil around us. It is too obvious as it was this past week.

And we certainly don't say this as simply hope of pie in the sky by and by.

While we do hope for God's future reign, we praise God in order to be strengthened and sustained as we go out into the world now. We go out to confront evil with God's goodness and to contend with hate in the power of God's love. We partner with the better angels in others to give the world glimpses now of God's reign, where evil will triumph no more.

So please see our praise of God this day as an act of defiance, a way of saying no to the evil and hatred around us.

Before there was worship, there was praise. Before there were preachers, there was praise. Before there were bulletins and Bibles; before there were sanctuaries and communion tables and pulpits; before there were prayers and theologies, there was praise. Before there were choirs and organs, directors of music and organists; before there were worship books and worship and music committees; at the very beginning of things there was praise. Today we especially affirm that before there was evil, there was praise. As one minister puts it (Ted Wardlaw), "Before we turn the lights out here, and turn off the sound system and go home today, don't forget that theologically speaking, before anything else, there is praise."

If you have a baby in your house, he or she knows that, am I right? I was reminded of this when we visited our grandchildren just a few weeks ago. Our ten month old grandson, little Austin, lying there in his crib, gets up before the first rays of the morning light, a little early for my taste. He doesn't know his own name, doesn't know the name of God, he cannot walk and he cannot talk; but he knows even at that early age that – with the beginning of dawn—the only appropriate thing to do is to sing a baby song of praise.

Or you have one of those conversations—it doesn't happen very often, but often enough for you to be reminded of how precious they are—in which what gets discussed is not the score of the Bears game or the stock market or the news headlines, but heart-talk. You hear, and you are heard; and a frog

comes to your throat and tears come to your eyes because to be understood in such a way is always such an incredible thing. And for the sheer wonder of that experience, you let out a burst of praise.

Or you take a walk toward Lake Michigan. Maybe it's evening and an owl is hooting. The wind whistles, and the prairie grass rustles, and the moonlight shimmers on the vast lake. The scene is absolutely gorgeous. And there's a rush in your blood! Before you try to put words around that feeling, it's a feeling that already has a name. It is called praise.

Before anything else, there is praise.

Scripture says so, too. As early as the first chapter of the first book of the Bible, there is that soaring poetry about creation. Of light and darkness, of earth and sky, of waters and plants and animals and finally people. And, at the end of all of this creative activity, as a kind of epilogue to it all, there is attributed to God's very self ... nothing other than a burst of praise: "God saw everything that God had made, and indeed, it was very good."

The Psalms echo with praise. Psalm 150 that was read a short time ago is an enthusiastic invitation to all humans, indeed, to all creatures , to praise the Lord. Praise is there, all through scripture, as if to suggest that praise lies beneath everything else as nothing less than the vigorous intent of God. Yes, God means for us to praise, God invites us to praise because nothing is more appropriate than praise. It's hard to say that in light of this past week and it's certainly not the first thing we say to those who grieve like our Jewish brothers and sisters in Pittsburgh. But though somewhat muted now, we remember we are a people of praise.

That's what our New Testament lesson suggests too. It is an effusive, exuberant outburst of praise, beginning with the word "Blessed," and ending with the phrase "to the praise of God's glory." In fact, the entire passage, all eleven verses, is one long breathless Greek sentence!

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,” the letter to the Ephesians opens. God “has blessed us.” How has God blessed these new Christians? God “chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world.”

Note who has done all this, note where all the action is here: with God, not with us. We gather in church on Sunday to praise God, to try to live our lives righteously Monday through Saturday, not in order to get somewhere with God but rather because, in Christ, we have already arrived. We bless God here on Sunday morning in church in our songs, and we bless God on Monday morning at home or in the office with our deeds of kindness to others because God has so blessed, redeemed, and forgiven us.

Because God has given all of this to us, we “might live for the praise of God’s glory.” When someone gives you a gift, you say, “Thank you.” Friends, think of our lives as Christians as thanks to and for God. We are the only song to God that many may ever hear, especially in these days. Make it a good song, a song worth singing, a song with so catchy a tune that others may sing it as well.

I confess that, when I first encountered this morning’s Scripture the preacher in me wasn’t quite sure what to do with it. By that I mean that many of us have been conditioned to hear sermons mainly on what we are to do, details on what we are to think or feel. But there is very little of that in the passage. The passage is mostly about God. It is singing about what God has done for us, how God has chosen, forgiven, redeemed, adopted us. And that’s a problem for us sometimes because many of us are here waiting for some word about what we are to do rather than to spend time listening to songs and sermons about what God has done.

How many times for example, have you heard people say things like, “Church is where we go to find out how to live better lives.” Well, that’s true. It is. But sometimes “how to live a better life” becomes just another set of self-help techniques, rules for better living, programs for personal betterment.

You don't need God for that. But in times like this we are reminded of how much we do need God.

So this is where we need to begin too—with remembrance of what God has done for and given to us—before we launch into any exploration of what we ought to do for God. We love because God first loved us. We sing praise because we have been blessed. Everything flows from that. No wonder the first congregational singing we do each Sunday in worship is not just any hymn but a hymn of praise. Yes, humanly speaking, before anything else there is praise. Now I confess I don't always do that and you don't either, I suspect, especially in times like this.

But the wonderfully exuberant opening shout of praise which begins both our Scripture lessons remind us that church is a *place* and worship a *time* of praise. Church calls us to a much bolder, morally riskier task than simply obeying God's rules. We are called, through our praise, to sign, signal, and witness the advent of a kingdom, a place where the prisoners, the poor, the oppressed, and the wretched of the earth are royalty and all things are made new. Our worship is not simply a sign of the coming kingdom. It is a manifestation of its presence. Here, that kingdom becomes tangible and visible. Here is where we are mentored to confront evil with good, to face intolerance with courage, and to go up against hate with love.

The kingdom can become present in worship. It sometimes is present outside of worship. It occasionally is present in the juxtaposition of both. The minister Ted Wardlaw tells about such a time in a Christmas Eve Service at Central Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, GA, where he served as pastor before becoming president of Austin Seminary.

The people who packed the chapel on that Christmas Eve evening for that 9:00 service had to file through a crowd of about 50 homeless men to get into the chapel. These men were the ones who had not made it into the church's night shelter—another capacity crowd, warm for the night, in the church's gymnasium. These 50 or so men were huddled together at that intersection—

busy and prominent during the day, but never more deserted than on that particular night. They were there waiting for a bus that would take them to a city shelter. We invited them to worship with us, says Wardlaw, but they had declined so that they could wait for their bus.

The chapel—on one side – the inside of its walls, the well-placed and warm; and on the other side—the outside— the cold and nearly-forgotten!

We processed into the chapel, said Wardlaw, we said a corporate prayer of confession, we kept some silence, and one of our Pastors announced the news that makes such confessional honesty possible: the news of pardon and acceptance. “Friends,” the Pastor said, “Believe the Good News of the Gospel! In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven!”

And at the moment that sentence was finished, an amazing thing happened. A huge cheer went up on the other side of the chapel wall! Those men were cheering the arrival of that bus that would take them to another shelter—a bleak version, at least, of pardon and acceptance.

But the effect on our side of the wall was riveting, Wardlaw continued. I will never be able to hear those words again without thinking of the only appropriate response to “Friends, believe the good news of the gospel! In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven” . . . is riotous cheering throughout the precincts of heaven and earth!

My friends, the invitation from God, I believe, is to do what our Scripture Lessons do— praise. For it comes from some place deep beneath everything else that is. To be in touch with such wonder is to want nothing more than to lend our own voices to it, and to follow the sound wherever it may lead – to be strengthened by it for our encounters with the evil and hate amidst us- and despite those encounters to live a life of praise – to God for all that God has done.

It's not easy, but neither is it impossible. In fact, it's one of the most important things we ever do! For before we are anything else—anything else at all—Christians are a people of praise. And the voices of praise lead us out from here to do what our charge I use from the Book of Common Worship calls us to do:

“Go out into the world in peace; have courage; hold on to what is good; return no one evil for evil; strengthen the fainthearted; support the weak; help the suffering; honor all people; love and serve the Lord, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.” Amen.