

SEQUOYAH HILLS  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

**“Praise Book: The Victory Won”**

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Psalm 149

July 24, 2022

This is the second to last week in our summer series in the Psalms. This whole month we’ve been focusing in particular on how the Psalms guide us in praise, in worship, one of those core Christian practices. We’ve been looking at the final five psalms, Psalm 146-150, which compose something of a coda to the entire book. Each one begins and ends with the words “Praise the Lord!” literally “Hallelujah.” So each week, we’ve asked what the particular psalm might say about how we as people of faith are called to worship. What matches how we currently worship? What might we be missing?

And we’ll see today, no matter how expansive or how comprehensive we might consider our worship to be, the Psalms never fail to call us to something more. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

*Praise the Lord!  
Sing to the Lord a new song,  
his praise in the assembly of the faithful.  
Let Israel be glad in its Maker;  
let the children of Zion rejoice in their King.  
Let them praise his name with dancing,  
making melody to him with tambourine and lyre.  
For the Lord takes pleasure in his people;  
he adorns the humble with victory.  
Let the faithful exult in glory;  
let them sing for joy on their couches.  
Let the high praises of God be in their throats  
and two-edged swords in their hands,  
to execute vengeance on the nations  
and punishment on the peoples,  
to bind their kings with fetters  
and their nobles with chains of iron,  
to execute on them the judgment decreed.  
This is glory for all his faithful ones.  
Praise the Lord!* *Psalm 149*

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Some may have been inspired last week, by the words of Psalm 148, to head to the mountains, out into nature, to join with creation to praise the name of the Lord, something off on our own. If you found yourself in that camp, the Psalm we just read in part might serve to bring us all back together.

These two psalms, put together, offer something of a one-two punch on how we might consider the act of worship, even within these final five psalms. What we might have gleaned from last week’s psalm was that

worship need not be confined to what you do in a church on Sunday mornings, because worship is much bigger than that; it's an act of all of creation. And that's absolutely true. It would be hubris of the highest degree to say, "Well worship has to happen here and like this and no other way."

But like I mentioned last week, a temptation in that is to think that we should instead just leave the church behind, go off on our own, and worship in whatever manner seems meaningful to us. And it's to that temptation that this psalm pulls us back. Does so in the very first verse: "Praise the Lord! Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise in the assembly of the faithful." There's something about assembling to worship that is crucial to praising the Lord. Why is that? Why can't we just go off on our own and leave it at that?

And in response to that question, I would offer that this psalm pushes us to consider these two things, both of which are better when we do it together: what we bring *to* worship, and how we go out *from* worship.

First, what we bring *to* worship.

In seminary, and a few of you have heard me share this story, they had a daily chapel service, and I was pretty good about going most days. Quick service. Usually about 20 minutes long. Tended to follow a similar format most days, a couple of songs, prayers, short homily. But on some days, you might find some elements included that you wouldn't normally expect. And that's to be expected when you have chapel every day, especially in a place that's meant to train future ministers, folks from different traditions. So, chapel would at times end up something of a melting pot.

And on occasion, the chapel service would include, or even feature, a form of worship known as liturgical dance. This hadn't been something I had really encountered all that much, so it was a bit of education for me. But the premise of liturgical dance is as you might imagine. Takes inspiration from verses like v. 3 and others like it: "Let them praise his name with dancing." So the goal of liturgical dance is to praise the Lord through movement, and it's often done as an interpretation of a Scripture reading too, letting movement convey the joy, tension, even frustration that you can hear at various points in Scripture.

Now I should qualify my experience with liturgical dance a little bit more, because it wasn't just something that I hadn't encountered all that much. It was also something that I had a hard time accepting, so that was one way of worship in which I was being stretched—not literally, though, I wasn't doing the dancing—so it was something I struggled to take seriously, and what happened this one day didn't help. I forget even what the Scripture passage even was, but the dance included, among other things, a couple of dancers rushing up the center aisle and, after they got up some speed, sliding up the hardwood floors on their stomachs, kind of like a penguin on ice. Now I suppose that they had practiced this, but maybe not in that particular space. You see this chapel is an historic space. Old building. The sort of building where every movement makes noise, creaking and cracking and the like. The reason I suspect that they practiced elsewhere is that wherever they would have rehearsed probably had newer hardwood floors, probably floors that had a bit more slide to them, meaning when they practiced rushing up and then slid on their stomachs, they would indeed slide.

But not so in the chapel. The hardwood was pretty old, and I expect hadn't been refinished or waxed in quite a while. So when the liturgical dancers rushed up the center aisle to slide up at the very end, and crouched down to launch into the final slide, it was like they were going down a slip n slide that didn't have any water or soap on it. There was no slide or give at all on that floor, and they met the hardwood with a deafening thud, followed by a handful of soft moans of lungs whose wind had just gotten knocked out of them, subsequently followed by muffled laughter throughout the chapel, and I'm sorry to say a bit of it came from yours truly.

And I share that because that particular experience has colored my impression of dance, of movement, as an expression of worship. Here it is, affirmed by Scripture, and not just here but many times in the psalms, but right here in the psalm we read, “Let them praise his name with dancing,” and I struggle to take it seriously, and left to my own devices, it is unlikely that I would ever seek to lead the people of God in worship through dance. If it’s solely up to me, worship would probably tend to look pretty similar week in and week out.

The opening verse of this psalm says, “Sing to the Lord a new song.” There’s an irony that a songbook containing 150 songs includes a call on a number of instances to sing a *new* song, as in, the psalm is calling us to sing something else, something new, something we’re not used to, something that perhaps left to our own devices we wouldn’t have considered to include in worship.

There’s a line of thought that floats around in the ministry world, almost as a guideline, a litmus test—and I don’t know if I entirely prescribe to it, but it’s worth consideration—but it says, “There should always be at least one part of worship that you’re not comfortable or familiar with.” Another way of putting it is, if you are familiar with *every* part of a service of worship, more than likely it means it’s flat. It means we’re not being stretched to sing a new song, whether it’s a song or liturgical dance or liturgy or instruments or a different form of prayer, to consider how we might praise, it means we are shaping the worship of Almighty God in our likeness, rather than being continually shaped in his.

And this is something we look at, both at our 8:45 service and our 11:00 service. How often do we introduce newer or even just less familiar hymns or other aspects of worship? Don’t do it at all, and it gets to feeling stale really quickly. Do too much of it, and it can feel kind of gimmicky honestly, even distracting. But even though in a given instance someone may or may not care for this or that different aspect of worship that we might try at one point or another, in premise at least we should all be convicted by Scripture, here affirmed in this psalm that it is good, fitting, and faithful to sing unto the Lord a new song.

And how do these new songs find their life? Says right there. In the assembly of the faithful. It is a beautiful thing to the Lord when worship is multifaceted, when his name is praised in a way that goes beyond what just one person might do. We all might bring something different in praise to the Lord, something that might be new to the brother or sister that shares a pew.

For as it says in v. 4, “For the Lord takes pleasure in his people.” Notice that it doesn’t say, “For the Lord takes pleasure in a person.” No doubt the Lord delights in each and every heart individually seeking him out; so don’t get me wrong. But isn’t it interesting here in this psalm of worship, about the assembly of the faithful, about new songs, that the Lord’s delight isn’t in the individual, but in his *people*? There’s something vital to worship in the people of faith *assembling*. Without it, we lose something. And that brings us to the second thing I think this psalm pushes us to consider: how we go out from worship. And just like what we bring to worship, this psalm isn’t speaking of what we do as individuals. You might have been a bit shocked by some of the language in this psalm.

First of all, those of you who may have gotten used to worshiping from home may have heard verse 5 and felt completely vindicated. After all, it says, “Let them sing for joy on their couches.” If that’s all you heard, though, I’m afraid the psalm is going to burst your bubble, because it doesn’t leave us on the couch. The people go out. And that’s where you might have been a bit startled by the phrasing too.

V. 6 says, “Let the high praises of God be in their throats and two-edged swords in their hands,” and then going on, “to execute vengeance on the nations and punishment on the peoples, to bind their kinds with fetters

and their nobles with chains of iron, to execute on them the judgment decreed.” You hear all that, and you think, well that sounds a bit combative then, doesn’t it? Is *that* what we’re supposed to do when we head out of worship?

Any of you familiar with the Berzerker tradition? Comes out of Viking lore and Scandinavia and the like. Warriors would gather in some kind of ritual religious ceremony, calling upon the strength of the gods, and then get worked up into some kind of frenzy, maybe with the help of some drugs along the way, and then go out in that frenzy into battle. They were called berzerkers—same place we get the word “berserk” from, as in, someone might go “berserk” over this or that. We read this part of the psalm and could think, that’s what this is describing. All you folks ready to go berserk as you head out of here? Do you have some chains in your cars or back at your homes that you’ve got ready for a post-worship king-binding?

The image here is of the people going out from worship, with the act of praise in fact continuing, and then going out and joining in God’s work, and at that time, if it’s true that this may have come out of Israel’s time in exile, when it seemed every king or emperor that rose up in the region would trample Israel under foot, what was considered God’s work had a decidedly nation-judging bent to it, restoring Israel to its home and setting things right. Translated, what that could mean for us a bit more broadly is that worship in the assembly of the faithful isn’t supposed to stop once the benediction is given and should do more than send us out with a bit more skip in our step for the week. It means that the act of worship continues and goes out with the faithful as they join in the Lord’s work in the world around them.

Have you considered worship that way? These are honest questions, without an assumed answer. For some worship is more about coming here and getting something out of it. And that’s an honest answer. For others, it might be a bit of comfort in an otherwise troubling week.

But if you were willing to embrace how this psalm guides us in worship, you might be led to embrace not just all the ways, even the new ways that we might offer our praise unto God, but also the notion that this praise doesn’t stop once you hit the parking lot. This praise could permeate into every action you take, every word you speak, in your homes, in your workplaces, in your schools. Do all of our actions over the course of a week sing praise unto God? Does everything we do join in his work in the world? Or is that just for Sundays?

In the middle of this psalm, there’s a phrase that I found powerful. It’s in v. 4. “For the Lord takes pleasure in his people”—that part we talked about—“He adorns the humble with victory.” This psalm has focused mostly on how we might praise God, but only in this verse does it speak of what God does. What does God do? He takes pleasure in his people, and he adorns the humble with victory.

Friends, everything we bring into worship, new songs and old, and everything about how we go out from worship, isn’t in some attempt to curry favor with the Lord or to make God like us more. It’s in response to what God has already done, and to the victory God has already won. So this week, ask yourself, for whatever step you might take, how might this step be a step of praise? And for whatever word you speak, how might that word be a word of praise?

For us, when we declare together that Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again, we are declaring in worship that everything we do is because of the victory God has already claimed in our lives. And that is cause to sing a new song every day.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.