

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Praise Book: Exclamation Points”

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Psalm 150

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This is the final week in our summer series “Praise Book.” We’ve been in the Psalms all summer, looking this month at the final five Psalms, Psalm 146-150, and asking how they guide us in worship. But before we get to the very last psalm, Psalm 150 today, a word about what’s coming up.

Next week, Pastor Mark is back from his sabbatical, and ain’t no one more thankful than I, and he’ll share a bit of his reflections from this time of rest and renewal the past couple of months.

But then after that, August 14 is our annual Rally Day, when we officially launch our program year, and along with it a new series. One thing that came out very clearly when we asked you over a year ago what some of the worries and concerns you carried were was a thread of insecurity at *messing up*, whether that’s in school, or professionally, at home, or spiritually. Not having it all together. There’s this fear of making a mistake, not necessarily a fear of failure, per se, but almost a sense of shame that came out of it, as if some balloon has been popped.

If that’s ringing true for you, or maybe for someone close to you, I hope you’ll invite them to be with us that day. We’ll be starting a series called “Stumbling,” and we’re going to look at the messy walk of faith, with all its doubts and questions, and the gospel of Christ alongside us even and especially when we fall. That’ll start in two weeks.

Today, as we wrap up this series in the Psalms, we read a song that, appropriately enough, seems to be a bit of a mess too. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

Praise the LORD!

Praise God in his sanctuary;

praise him in his mighty firmament!

² *Praise him for his mighty deeds;*

praise him according to his surpassing greatness!

³ *Praise him with trumpet sound;*

praise him with lute and harp!

⁴ *Praise him with tambourine and dance;*

praise him with strings and pipe!

⁵ *Praise him with clanging cymbals;*

praise him with loud clashing cymbals!

⁶ *Let everything that breathes praise the LORD!*

Praise the LORD!

Psalm 150

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.

Something has been nibbling away at the foundations of society: exclamation points. They are running away at an unchecked pace. Everywhere now. Have you written something, a text or an email, and caught yourself wondering, “Wow, I’ve put down a lot of exclamation points. I was only saying thank you”? Or maybe it was the other way around. Maybe you responded “OK” to someone, but then *gasp* you didn’t put an exclamation point

on it, and now you're worried that you came across as angry. You are not alone. Linguists have been picking up on this phenomenon for a while now, and the situation doesn't seem to be getting better.

At one point in time, an exclamation point was reserved only for the truly emphatic point—it apparently was taught to journalists that you only get one exclamation point to use ever, so save it for something like “Alien Invasion!” Now, though, they're part of normal communication, to the point that if you don't use them, you feel like you sound cold or uninterested. Some linguists theorize that in the way it's used now, an exclamation point no longer means excitement or strong emotion, but rather just sincerity. And that's all well and good, I suppose. Language changes after all. But a problem arises when you actually do want to show excitement, because a single exclamation point simply won't do. Question is, how many do you need?

Well, a linguist asked that very question a few years ago. (Just over Twitter, so exact science, it ain't.) But she asked the Twitterverse, “If I want to convey genuine enthusiasm, how many exclamation points do I need?” The top answer? Not one. Not two. But three. To show actual excitement, you need three exclamation points.

And I share all that with you, one to reveal my inner curmudgeon—if you couldn't tell that already about me. But also because today's psalm, the last psalm in the entire Book of Psalms is littered with exclamation points.

If you were reading along, you may have already noticed that. Every single verse ends in an exclamation point.

Now a quick note about punctuation and translations—I know, please try to restrain your excitement. Every punctuation mark you see in a Bible is an editorial choice made by a translator, because in the oldest manuscripts we've got, there is no punctuation at all. No periods, no commas. So really it means that some translator chose to add these exclamation points. And just to be fair, some translations do; some don't. Mixed bag. So at some point, someone said, “I think every line should end in an exclamation point.” And if there was ever cause to end every single sentence with an exclamation point, save your headlines about alien invasions, because this is it.

Did you hear the language of this psalm? It is saturated with praise. Every line save one begins with the word “praise.” These last five psalms have been pretty heavy on praise already, but it's like this final psalm doubles down on it. It sounds like the whole symphony is involved. Starting in v. 3, “Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp!” Then tambourines and dancing, strings and pipe. “Praise him with clanging cymbals”—and just in case we didn't understand what cymbals sounded like, it adds— “praise him with loud clashing cymbals! Let everything that breathes praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!”

There is excitement; there is energy; there is enthusiasm. There is joy and jubilation. It's like all the words of the psalms, of prayer and adoration, lament and frustration, ultimately lead to this point, to this place of joyful praise to the God who is worthy. But it also kind of sounds like a mess, doesn't it? All these instruments going at the same time. Have you ever heard something like that? Doesn't always sound good, does it?

When I was younger, I was a big jam band fan. Grateful Dead, Phish, that sort of thing. At that point in my life, if you said, “Hey, you want to hear this song with a 30-minute guitar solo?” I'd say, “Sign me up!” And it meant that I went to a handful of music festivals, and one thing you would see at these festivals, aside from all the acts, was a strange phenomenon called a drum circle. Jam band fans *love* drum circles.

If you don't know what a drum circle is, don't worry. It's not a complicated premise. It is exactly what it sounds like. One person starts thumping away at the underside of a Home Depot bucket, then someone else starts joining in thumping away on the top of a cooler, then more and more people bring other things, forming a circle, all thumping away on various objects all at the same time.

And it's all just a big mess, and it doesn't sound very good.

Honestly, when I read about all these instruments blaring out in praise to the Lord, I wonder if it kind of sounds like a drum circle.

Is that the vision of praise to the Lord? Is all that excitement and enthusiasm the culmination of all the psalms, ultimately leading up to just kind of a mess?

If that's where we should be, maybe we've been missing something. Obviously order in worship is something that we put a high value on. In our particular tradition, the joke is you can't worship unless you have a piece of paper saying how you're going to do it. Of course that's not true, but there has been a longstanding heritage of restraint in worship.

And for good reason too. Music sometimes has the singular ability to elevate and inspire the human spirit, but it can also get indulgent very quickly. That's a tricky thing in a worship setting, because our attention can easily be drawn to the music itself rather than to the one whom the music should point us. Then it's less worship and more a recital or a concert.

Kind of on this topic, a quick side note. Every so often I'll get asked about clapping: should we clap, should we not clap? Here's what I would offer you. Under the umbrella of expressions of worship directly affirmed by Scripture, "clapping" is fair game. The problem is that clapping, culturally, is also the way to express adoration and thanks to a performer. So what are we to do?

Well what I would say is, if, during worship, you are led to express your joy and adoration of the Lord by clapping, maybe even in response to a song, anthem, or solo, clap away and don't let anyway tell you different. But, if the reason you feel led to clap is even in part directed more at the person or persons, maybe reel it in and just thank them later.

It's the same reason why Paul called upon the church in Corinth for every gift, every expression in worship to have some limitations on them, because it should all be to the glory of God and for the building up of the church, and not solely about individual expression.

Now some are thinking right now, "Yeah, restraint isn't a problem for us." You might even wish we had a little less restraint. But for one, consider yourselves fortunate. Presbyterians have come a long way. John Calvin, father of the Reformed tradition, banned all musical instruments of any kind in worship. Just a cappella. (So if you ever think, "I wish worship could be more traditional," just remember that "traditional worship" used to mean no instruments at all.)

But if you've ever wondered, why are we kind of reserved in worship? Feels kind of stuffy sometimes. That's a good question. Because you're right. It is restrained. There is reserve. There's structure. You tend not to have folks running up and down the aisle or things done on the fly or without preparation.

And that can be a good thing, don't get me wrong. But in the interest of restraint and guarding against indulgence in worship, have we sacrificed what this psalm is speaking of: unbridled joy in the act of praise?

Because I've got to tell you, some mornings, and I'm as guilty of this as anyone, I don't sense excitement and joy in our singing. Sure there are some of us who come with joy in your heart and sing it every week, and I can see you when you do, and you lift my heart. But then there's also a good bunch of us, stone-faced, in a low mumble barely muttering through the songs we sing.

Now the point I want you to take from this isn't, "You should feel bad because you don't sing loudly." I don't want you to feel like you should have to somehow fake excitement or sentiment just because you come to church. I've been in churches that feel that way, when it almost feels manufactured, and that's not good or pleasing to God either. And if this whole God, Jesus, and church thing isn't quite something you're sure about, you definitely shouldn't feel like you have to act a certain way.

But for those who claim to be saved by the grace of God in Christ Jesus, the forgiveness of sins, and the life everlasting, the more important question I want us to ask is, "What does it say about our faith if our worship doesn't seem to match the joy and excitement that we hear in this psalm?" Well some might say, "Oh you don't

want to hear me sing.” Who cares? God wants to hear it. What does it say about our faith if we’re more concerned about what those sitting in front of us think about our voice than offering a joyful noise to the living God who has saved us?

So we’ve got joy and excitement pulling us one way. We’ve got restraint and orderly worship pulling us another. Where do we land on this?

I find it telling that this psalm begins, not with the first instruments that begin playing, but with calling for praise to God where? “In His sanctuary,” and “in His mighty firmament.” In other words, in his holy place. This joyful call to praise is first into a place of reverence before the majesty of God. “Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his surpassing greatness!”

And if you’ve ever wondered what that might sound like, I’d offer you one place to listen. I was set onto this by another pastor, and I’m grateful she did.

Over fifty years ago in the mid-60s, the jazz musician Duke Ellington got his band together for a new project. He wanted to show that jazz, which had tended to be thought of as unruly, chaotic, even demonic in some circles, could be reverent too.

So he did a series of concerts called the *Sacred Concerts*, musical interpretations of Scripture and theology. The first was in fact recorded in a Presbyterian church in New York: Fifth Avenue Presbyterian.

But in the second concert, the final piece was an interpretation of this very psalm. The song’s title was “Praise God and Dance!”

It begins with a single classical soprano over an electric piano, singing slowly, as if she were part of a church choir, “Praise God with the sound of a trumpet,” with a jazz trumpet chiming in in response. And it almost sounds sad at first. It’s very airy, restrained, reverent is the word I would use.

But then as it goes on, the drums kick in, the stand-up bass line, the full horn section. The tempo speeds up, and while still restrained—this is no atonal jazz here—the shouts of “Dance!” that intersperse the rest of the song don’t feel out of place. More and more instruments seem to join in as the song goes on. You can hear the trumpets, the tambourine, the strings and pipe, and clanging cymbals; they’re all there. You can hear the excitement, the energy, the joy behind them. Until finally, you hear the singers come back in “Let everything that has breath praise God; praise the Lord; praise ye the Lord; and dance, dance, dance!” And after one last word from the trumpet, it all ends with a jubilant shout with every instrument joining the chorus, “Dance!”

And for me, if there’s ever been music that captures the reverence and the joy that we hear in this psalm, this place to which the psalms are guiding us, gosh that’s got to come close.

Friends, not every Sunday is going to feel like dancing in the aisles or some cathartic experience and communion with the Lord. Some weeks in worship you may come and not much feel like singing. Some weeks you may not feel much joy in your heart at all. Doesn’t mean you shouldn’t be here. Doesn’t mean we don’t want you here. I mean for goodness sakes, it’s not like the Psalms are all these happy, vapid love songs to Jesus. They’re real. They go deep. And for all the times they speak of adoration and joy, they also speak of pain, longing, and lament. These words of worship give voice to it all.

But the word of hope to which God is guiding us is this vision of reverent joy, when we are in the presence of God and all reason for worry is gone and all that is left is to simply say, Praise God! May that joy be with you and within you. May that joy be seen and heard coming from you, and may there even be an exclamation point on it.

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