

Choose Praise - Jim Reinhard

Isaiah 40:21-31; Psalm 147:1-11, 20c; 1 Corinthians 9:16-23; Mark 1:29-39

Many years ago... (Oh, dear. I'm discovering that most of my sentences begin that way. Grant me this one exception and I promise not to get old and senile, and live in the past.) Here's the memory: our youngest of four was being tucked in. He was under five years of age, if I recall correctly; we were at his bedside to say goodnight. That was said, but the expression in his eyes let us know there was something more to follow. Sure enough, he added joyously, "I'm going to have a good dream tonight!"

"How on earth do you know that?" (It was the question he wanted, so I didn't disappoint him.) "I'm going to have a good dream, because I've already started it!" he exclaimed.

Buckwheat (later just "Buc"), as he was named by his two older brothers, was making an attempt to set the right mental pictures in motion for a long night capable of producing some frightful nightmares. I thought with a smile as we left his room, "Wouldn't it be nice if we could dial a dream, or better still, select a morning mood?" George Buttrick, author of that marvelous book on prayer, was heard to say, "I don't even believe in God until I've had that first cup of coffee." Select a morning mood? With God's help we can choose praise!

C.S. Lewis in his book Mere Christianity wrote: *The real problem of the Christian life comes where people do not usually look for it. It comes the very moment you wake up each morning. All your wishes and hopes for the day rush at you like wild animals, and the first job is shoving them all back. You listen to the other voice. You take the other point of view. You let the larger, stronger, quieter life come flowing in. And so all day, standing back from all your natural fussing and frettings, you come in out of the wind.*

Our gospel lectionary reading in Mark might suggest that our Lord is doing just that, "coming in out of the wind." We find something typical of Mark's writing style in chapter one, verse 35—Mark often uses two-step descriptors. Here's an example: *While it was still night, way before dawn* Jesus found a solitary place; Mark writes of Jesus' early popularity and then informs us that he could leave the crowds behind to commune with his heavenly father early in the morning. (That's when my body and psyche are still begging for more sleep.)

My guess is that Jesus frequently drew from the Psalter to voice his morning prayers. The book of Psalms is the most read book in the Bible and it's the one Jesus quotes most often. He quotes the Psalms on eleven occasions, but I'll not list these. With Psalms Jesus can outwit the Pharisees; he quotes Psalm 22 while dying on the cross, *My God, my God why have you forsaken me?* When the Jews want to stone Jesus for claiming to be God he responds with a line from the Psalms. We don't have to stretch the imagination to see our Lord using the Psalter as he chose adoration, praise, and gratitude in his early morning hours of prayer. If our Lord chose prayer over popularity we ought to make prayer more of a priority in our lives, especially prayers of praise and gratitude. We worship with Psalms!

And to return to my introduction, we can choose a morning mood; we can choose praise. We can pray the psalms.

Henri Nouwen wrote in his book, *Show Me The Way: A life of faith is a life of gratitude—it means a life in which I am willing to experience my complete dependence upon God and to praise and thank him unceasingly for the gift of being. A truly Eucharistic life means always saying thanks to God, always praising God, and always being more surprised by the abundance of God’s goodness and love. How can such a life not also be a joyful life? It is the truly converted life in which God has become the center of all. In such a life gratitude is joy and joy is gratitude and everything becomes a surprising sign of God’s presence.* (P.16)

On this 5th Sunday after the Epiphany I choose to zero in on Psalm 147 and bypass the Corinthian reading; I found Paul in today’s reading not appalling, but less than appealing. Seminary professor, Rolf Jacobson, the Lutheran scholar, author of *Invitation to the Psalms*, has given me help with these verses. The psalm for this morning is the second of five “Alleluia” hymns that close the Psalter. Each of the last five psalms starts and ends with the imperative, “Praise the Lord!” Together these psalms put an exclamation point on the book that the Jewish community calls “Praises”. In other words, the Psalter closes with an extended call to praise. It’s intended to speak to us! Psalm 147 conforms to the standard pattern of the hymn of praise. The psalm has three stanzas, each of which opens with a call to praise and then continues by recounting reasons for praise. The lectionary for this Sunday includes only the first two stanzas. The call to praise is stated four times in this psalm—once at the start of each stanza and once at the very end:

Vs. 1 Praise the Lord, how good it is to sing praise... and a song of praise is fitting.

Vs. 7 Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving, make melody to our God on the lyre.

Vs. 12 Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem! Praise your God, O Zion!

Vs. 20c Praise the Lord!

So these injunctions to praise quite literally call for a response. We are called to open our mouths, lift up our voices, and join in the psalmist’s joyous song. The book of Psalms ends with five psalms that include calls to praise. A final hymn, Psalm 150, is nothing but an extended call to praise. (We will read that together at the end of this meditation.) That simply means that we as readers are invited to take up the songs we have learned from the Psalter, and sing those songs out in the world. We are to sing our testimony about God.

The professor writing on the Psalter tells us there are two types of praise: on the one hand there is praise that is sung to God, on the other hand, there is praise sung about God. Praise that is sung to God generally uses the second person, of course. E.g., *All your works shall give thanks to you, O Lord.* (Ps. 145:10) Praise that is sung about God generally uses the third person. E.g., *The Lord lifts up the downtrodden, he casts the wicked to the ground.* Psalm 147 is exclusively praise of this second type—praise that is sung about God. The purpose of this type of praise is testimony. One has written, *The purpose of praise is to bear witness to all who hear that GOD is GOD!*

Rolf’s helpful commentary continues: *The testimony of our psalm ranges between two poles—creation and redemption.* In terms of creation, the psalm bears witness to God as the creator and sustainer. He determines the number of the stars, he gives to all of them their names; vs. 4 “He covers the heavens with clouds, prepares rain for the earth, makes grass grow on the hills; he

gives the animals their food, and to the young ravens when they cry.” In terms of redemption: the psalm bears witness to God’s blessing and redemption in Israel’s history—especially in the act of restoring Jerusalem following the Babylonian exile. The Psalm ends with what is called the scandal of election.. God chose one nation to be blessed as a blessing to all other nations “He has not dealt thus with any other nation.” vs. 19. Because God chose Abraham and Sarah and their offspring, healing and reconciliation and blessing have flowed out through Israel to reach all of us.

I’m sure you would agree with me that it is a God-given privilege for each of us to sing praises to God. Just as the psalmist praised and thanked God for particular blessings, so I’m certain each of you have your particular blessings and cause for gratitude; Marilyn and I certainly do. What with our four adult children, 16 grandkids and 7 greats. We drove all the way to Harrisonburg, VA a few days ago to welcome that great grandchild #7, Liam James! Marilyn has lots of pictures on her phone in case you’re interested.

Just last week at the Simple Room I observed a large sign taped to the wall. Apparently the kids had been asked to write on the big page things for which they wanted to praise God. I found paper and pencil and copied some of their praises; these include: smiles, family, sunsets, shoes, pizza, candy, puppies, giggles, music, forgiveness, JESUS showing us his love by dying on the cross, LIGHT, toilet paper!

The psalmist speaks of those blessings in nature; as I worked on these remarks I happened to look out at a snow covered back yard and there were a half dozen or more robins! In early February! I praised God and dreamed of daffodils. Peterson translates one verse out of Psalm 147 – “Who can survive his winter? Then the Lord gives the command and it all melts; he breathes on winter- suddenly its spring.” I look out my front window and see rose bushes waiting first to be pruned; and waiting for spring and summer buds and flowers to inspire the neighborhood. Right now it feels like a long wait!

Maybe for you the best part of waking up is not Folgers in your cup. And I rarely if ever feel like doing the morning dance in the Folgers TV ad! Is there anyone here like I who must struggle with mild depression now and again? I’m coming out of it more readily these days. Let me tell you why and how. Last week Marilyn started reading her new devotional book to me. It’s a gift from our daughter, Sheri. I don’t often get into devotional books unless they’re written by the late Henri Nouwen. Well, I responded with a big “Yes” as she continued reading. This might even be ten times better than a caffeine jump start. I’ve seriously taken up the challenge. The book by Ann Voskamp is entitled One Thousand Gifts. And it’s all about choosing praise. Here’s Ann’s introduction:

“It all began quite spontaneously, unintentionally. One of those things God grows up in the most unexpected places. A friend dared me to start counting one thousand things I loved. I took the dare, accepted the challenge, and kept track of one thousand things, one thousand gifts- a thousand graces on a quiet unassuming blog. Before I knew it, thankfulness to God began to fully change me. What I actually found--- startling!! – was more daily wonder and surprising beauty than I ever expected. And in a few short years, this daily hunt for God’s grace, His glory, had ushered me into a fuller life. A life of joy! Over the past several years, I’ve listed over four

thousand gifts.. And I continue. Once one has begun, has tasted and known He is God, who can stop giving Him glory? Thousands more have begun their own lists- in jail cells and by death beds, in third world slums and by faith alone- and it's not an overstatement to say that giving him thanks has made me- and innumerable others – overcomers...I found myself on a transformative journey that effected every aspect of my life, including all the broken places. God began to show me the graces, the love gifts that were right before me, waiting to be noticed, waiting to be received. This easily overlooked stuff, the small and especially the hard- became for me a life-giving stream of joy in Him. When I face heartache and conflict I've begun to accept that even the impossible is a possible opportunity to thank God, to experience his goodness and grace as the Giver of all. There is **always only more grace. And it's always more than I expect.**" (Her blog site is aholyexperience.com)

Barbara Brown Taylor chooses praise in a different and most unique way! In her essays on Science and Religion – she calls her book, The Luminous Web. Here's what she writes on the evolution of praise! The EVOLUTION of praise! It relates well to Psalm 147!

“When I survey this 15 billion year old history (which has more good guesses in it than hard facts), it is difficult to miss the most stunning miracle of creation: that in us, the universe has become conscious. We are the first creatures to articulate the motion of the planets. We are the first creatures to discern the commonality of all life. For those of us who believe God is the source from which we all arose, we are the first creatures to say so out loud.

This urge we have to understand the universe transcends the evolutionary model. This cosmic consciousness of ours is not necessary for survival. We could eat, sleep, multiply, and prosper without ever thinking twice about where we came from or what it is all about.

Meanwhile, science cannot explain how human consciousness works or where it comes from. It is as much a mystery as the moment before the universe began. I spoke earlier of how much time is required for an eyeball to look back at a light sensitive cell. How much more time does it take for quantum particles to mature to the point where they may compose hymns of praise? Whether your answer is seven days or fifteen billion years, it remains a miracle that we are here at all, and able to praise our maker. God may well prefer the sound of spring peepers (the brownish tree frog), but I have to believe there was joy in heaven when the first human being looked at the sky and said, ‘Thank you for this.’”

In her book, Leaving Church, the same author Barbara Brown Taylor chooses praise and writes of those believers who found themselves running into God's glory all over the place, including places where Christian doctrine said that it should not be. I knew Christians who had beheld God's glory in a Lakota sweat lodge, in a sacred Celtic grove, and at the edge of a Hawaiian volcano, as well as in dreams and visions that they were afraid to tell anyone else about at all. These people not only feared being shunned for their unorthodox narratives, they also feared sharing some of the most powerful things that had ever happened to them with people who might dismiss them. Given the history of Christians as a people who started out beholding what was beyond belief, this struck me as a lamentable state of affairs, both for those who have learned to see no more than they are supposed to see as well as for those who have excused themselves from traditional churches because they see too little or too much. If it is true that God exceeds all

our efforts to contain God, then is it too big a stretch to declare that *dumbfoundedness* is what all Christians have most in common? Or that coming together to confess all that we do not know is at least as sacred an activity as declaring what we think we do know?“(

Barbara Brown Taylor in Mixed Blessings. I’ve quoted her so much I guess I could just refer to her as “Barb”. She speaks about the ritual we have developed in the reading of scripture. The reader finishes the reading, pauses for a moment to let it sink in, and says, “The word of the Lord.” Then it is the congregation’s turn to accept that word by responding, “Thanks be to God,” which is an easy and natural thing to say when the lesson has been about God’s goodness towards us. But how about those lessons that are full of doom, like last week’s reading from Zephaniah? “I will bring such distress on people that they shall walk like the blind because they have sinned against the Lord, their blood shall be poured out like dust, and their flesh like dung” (Zephaniah 1:17) Pause. “The word of the Lord.” Pause. We know our line, but it is hard to pronounce with feeling. But pronounce it we do, if not with feeling then with pure, blind faith. “Thanks be to God”, we say, because we believe that God is somewhere to be found in everything that happens to us. “Thanks be to God”, we say because we believe that the cords of God’s love are never severed, however dark or convoluted our path through life may sometimes be.

Finally I want to conclude with a marvelous prayer written by my new friend Dr. Victor Shepherd professor at Tyndale Seminary in Toronto:

“Eternal God, the Psalmist has said that you are the one whose mercy endures forever. We praise you for that mercy which greeted us at our birth and will surround us at our death. Give us grace to cast ourselves on you, knowing that that which we entrust to you, you will keep safe until the day when faith gives way to sight and we know you as you now know us. We thank you for those whom your Spirit touched and whom you inspired to write or paint, or play or sing, so as to honor you and lift us:

For Mozart and his Requiem; For Ella Fitzgerald and her gift of gospel song; For Christina Rossetti and her sensitive poetry; For C.S. Lewis and his haunting children’s stories; For Stephen Schwartz and his catchy Godspell. As you have allowed all of these to peer into the kingdom of your grace and truth, so let us share their vision in order that our hunger for you might be deepened and met, and our thirst for you a rule sharpened and slaked.

We praise you for those little known people who schooled us in faith when we were young and impressionable; unknown persons who encouraged us to pray, who exemplified trust, who pointed out pitfalls, who focused our discernment, who combined the detachment of scholarship and the commitment of faith. Their influence upon us is immeasurable, as our debt to them is unpayable. We thank you for them and trust you to use us as you have used them, for after us come youngsters who have resolved to follow our Lord. We plead with you for those whose growth in faith has been stunted by an image of deity that falsifies you, by a friend who faltered when needed most, by gospel presentations which insult intelligence, by a shrillness of spirit devoid of compassion. You alone, O God, are the searcher of hearts. You alone know when lack of trust arises on account of our sin and when it is rooted in our being sinned against. Then to your mercy we commend such people now. Just as you have brightened us with the knowledge

of Christ you have granted to us, so continue to lead us in your will and way that we may be lights to those who live around us. And they will then give glory to you who are ever worthy of our **praise**. Amen.”

Let us now choose praise and share together in the reading the last of the 150 Psalms: