***LET THERE BE...PRAISE!***

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Texts: Psalm 147 and Ephesians 1:3-14

Throughout this Advent and Christmas season our devotional guide and sermons have led us through a series of themes that have tracked the candles we light on the Advent wreath. We began with

*Let there be…hope!* with the lighting of the first candle, then

*Let there be…peace!* then

*Let there be joy!* as we lit a pink candle, then

*Let there be love!* and finally at Christmas:

*Let there be light!*

All of those weeks were, in some form, prayers for what we were asking from God: *hope, peace, joy, love, and light*. They are gifts we want for ourselves and for our world. But in and through our lives, we are called to reflect those same great gifts *to* the world. Those gifts all come from God in the good news of Jesus’ birth, as he comes to us as Emmanuel, God with us! Today, I want to suggest that in this new year, we move beyond asking for something *from* God and offer something *to* God in gratitude for those good Christmas gifts and so much more. At the dawn of this long-awaited, can’t-get-here-soon-enough-and-we-are-glad-its-finally-here new year, let our new year’s resolution be: *Let there be…praise!*

After the dumpster fire that was 2020, some may wonder what we have to praise God for, apart from the obvious: the arrival of 2021, leaving the last miserable year behind us! That would be fair if we were to praise God only when life was good. But we are not called to be fair-weather Christians who rejoice and give thanks to God when all is going well while railing against God in the face of adversity. Israel provided a pretty good model of that kind of fickle faith as they made their way out of Egypt into the wilderness. Every time they faced a challenge – at the Red Sea with the Egyptian army closing in, at Meribah when they were thirsty, in the desert when they were hungry, at the foot of Mt. Sinai when Moses delayed in coming down – the Israelites whined and denounced God for leading them out of Egypt into whatever predicament they found themselves. They were very much what-have-you-done-for-me-lately people with short memories. They praised God immediately after deliverance, forgot God soon thereafter, and then railed against God when the going got tough.

What a contrast the people’s lived reality was to that life of praise urged by the psalmist! Psalm 147 that we heard this morning opens and closes with a resounding Hallelujah, and the psalmist would be the first to suggest that such praise should bookend our lives, our years, and our days as well! From our first breath of life to the last, on the first day of the year and the last, in our first stirrings in the morning and in the moment when we lay our heads down to rest at the end of the day, praise should rise from our hearts and lips. It is Hallelujah Chorus kind of praise that cannot be restrained, regardless of how good or bad or ugly the day or the year might be.

The psalmist’s praise springs from appreciation for the wonder of creation and recognition of the multitude of God’s blessings. It is cosmic in scope and communal in spirit. It recognizes that glorious sunrises and sunsets are the work of God’s paintbrush, rains that water the earth flow from God’s hand, snow and frost are God’s wintry gifts, the Great Conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn is God’s diamond in the sky! In all of creation God is at work in wild and wonderful ways. A child’s letter to God captures it well:

*Dear God,*

*I didn’t think orange went with purple (obviously not a Clemson fan) until I saw the sunset you made on Tuesday night. That was really cool!*

Even at her young age that child was able to see God’s hand in the wonder of the world around her and give voice to her praise – *really cool* indeed! After 25 years I still find myself in awe of the spectacular sunrises on the Blue Ridge and find the words of a hymn running through my mind each new day that I see one:

*When morning gilds the skies my heart awakening cries:*

*Let Jesus Christ be praised!*

Praise is our response to God inspired by awe, gratitude, and recognition that it is God’s handiwork that we are seeing. Young Jeff recognized God’s hand at work in writing this note to God:

*Dear God,*

*It is great the way you always get the stars in the right place.*

*Why can’t you do that with the moon?*

Sometimes the wonder of creation leaves us not only awed, but wondering what God had in mind in creating this universe the way God did. But know that it is God who does the creating. As Mary Oliver asks in her poem, “I Wake Close to Morning”:

*Why do people keep asking to see*

*God’s identify papers*

*when the darkness opening into morning*

*is more than enough?*

*Certainly any god might turn away in disgust.*

*Think of Sheba approaching*

*the kingdom of Solomon.*

*Do you think she had to ask,*

*“Is this the place?”[[1]](#endnote-1)*

How many times do we fail to see the wonder of the world around us or fail to recognize God’s creative hand at work in it? Do you take for granted the beauty of the corner of creation in which you live? Do you see the sunrise or just the glare in your eyes? Are you so distracted by your to-do list or the worries of the day that you fail to see what God is doing all around you? Alice Walker suggests that it ticks off God when we fail to notice the color purple. And she is right! The coronavirus may be raging all around us, but the radiant colors in the morning sky and the twinkling lights at night continue to shine forth. Did you notice? Flowers still bloomed in the spring, and trees still blossomed. Did you notice? In some parts of the world the sky is the clearest that it has been in decades as traffic ground to a halt due to the virus. Did anyone notice? Each and every day offers fresh evidence of God’s creative and creating hand. Do you notice or is God’s work there in vain? And if you do notice, do you recognize it as God’s hand at work and allow a word of praise to slip from your lips or at least to cross your cluttered mind?

Praise doesn’t have to be shouted from the rooftops, though it might be. It can be whispered. It can be a smile that crosses your lips (behind your mask) or a fleeting sense of wonder that crosses your mind. Sometimes it is best expressed in a simple, “Wow!” But it does not happen if we do not appreciate the gift or recognize the divine giver. The first question of the Westminster catechism asks: *What is the chief end (or purpose) of humankind?* And the answer is: *To glorify God and enjoy God forever.* God has given us this amazing world to enjoy, and our delight in it should give rise to praise of the God who makes it all possible.

Perhaps a resolution for this new year might be to enjoy life a little more, coronavirus or no coronavirus, to be more attuned to the world around you and to the God who brought it all into being. Perhaps a resolution might be to give thanks for each and every breath that you take, and for the eyes with which you see what you see, and for the ears with which you hear the thunder roll and the birds sing! Resolve to appreciate the wonder of each day, not just when you are hiking in the mountains or walking in the park or are out fly fishing, but also when you are passing by the window in your home or are heading off to do whatever it is you do, for in things great and small, the hand of God is at work in our midst.

That work is not confined to the natural world. In our individual lives and our shared lives, God is at work too. The psalmist describes it in these terms:

*The Lord heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds.*

*The Lord lifts up the downtrodden and casts the wicked to the ground.*

*God blesses your children within you.*

*God grants peace within your borders.*

*God fills you with the finest of wheat.*

Our God is an active God, caring for us day in and day out. Sometimes we are the downtrodden who God lifts up; sometimes we are the brokenhearted who God comforts. Sometimes we are the sick who God heals or the sick at heart to whom God offers hope. And sometimes we are the instruments by which God does those good things for others.

Consider then a resolution this year to appreciate the people in your life – those you see each day, and those whom you have not seen for a long time due to this pandemic, and those whose memories continue to inspire you though they are long gone from this earth. Give thanks to God for those people; praise God for those people. For God has shaped your life through them, and God continues to shape your life through them and through others, some of whom may enter your life this new year for the first time.

Jim Simpson tells of a church in the Highlands of Scotland where sheep dogs used to sit patiently in the church through the long services. But when the congregation rose for the benediction, the dogs would begin to stretch and bark excitedly. So great was the noise that sometimes the benediction could barely be heard. The elders finally decided that the service really ought to close in a more dignified way. So, they resolved to sit until the benediction was over. One Sunday a visiting minister found to his great surprise that the people were still sitting when it was time for the benediction. He hesitated, waiting for them to rise. After a couple of awkward moments one old shepherd looked up and said, “Carry on minister. We’re just sitting to mislead the dogs.”

Sometimes I think we mislead one another by sitting on our praise, by holding back our joyful gratitude to God and restraining our Hallelujahs. Let this year be different. Let your praise ring out, not just on Sunday mornings, but every morning and every night and at countless times in between. Let your joy at being God’s people mark your life and our life together. In short, in 2021 let there be praise of the Lord our God. Hallelujah! Amen

1. Mary Oliver, “I wake Close to Morning” in *Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver*, Penguin Books:2017 p.3 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)