

“SUMMER PSALMS”, part 4

Psalm 111

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My daughter has talked about wanting to get a tattoo of the alphabet on her leg, all the letters, each one in a different style. The reason? A sense of awe at the power of those little symbols: with just those 26 letters, you have everything you need to say absolute anything you want to say.

This week’s Psalm made me think of that, because it reflects a similar love of the alphabet and understanding of the power of words. What’s most intriguing about this Psalm is something that isn’t obvious in the English version: it’s an acrostic; that is, the first phrase begins with “aleph” and each successive phrase begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet – using all 22 of them. This framework suggests that the Psalm should be understood as a comprehensive – “A-to-Z” - expression of praise and celebration of God’s work.

That structure meant, of course, that the Psalmist couldn’t choose just any words or images, couldn’t simply repeat phrases from familiar prayers. It had to require careful thought, and discipline as well as creativity. And to make the *content* suit the form – to reflect the comprehensive goodness of God – the writer must have had to draw not just on some wordsmithing skills, but on a deep and wide spiritual foundation as well.

He remembers the faithfulness of God to the people of Israel: feeding them, giving them a place and an identity and a history, providing the guidance of the law to shape their community, saving them from trouble. He praises God’s greatness, majesty, power, honor. God’s works and God’s name are wonderful, holy, awesome, and just, forever and ever. But this Psalmist knows both the transcendence and immanence of God. Intertwined with the majesty of God is a more intimate view: God is gracious, merciful, mindful, faithful. God’s work inspires both awe and delight. You can see how it’s meant to be a brief but at the same time comprehensive expression of praise. And you can also see how each bit of it encompasses so much, and is meant to remind those who sing or say it of particular blessings and help, of stories and memories and feelings. Each phrase seems to say, “I could go on and on....”

I will admit that I did wonder, just a bit, when Jerry and I made this plan to preach on Psalms of praise and gratitude for six weeks here at the end of summer, whether that would prove to too much. Would there be enough to say? Enough different ways to say it? Psalm 111 certainly suggests that the answer is yes. Well, why would it not be? We have a whole alphabet, a whole dictionary of tools. And if we really believe, as the Psalmist says, that the “works of the Lord are great,” why not?

We generally have little trouble complaining about things in our lives or our world, at length and in exhaustive detail. But so often our prayers of thanks and praise are perfunctory and formulaic. I don’t mean it’s not heartfelt; it’s just that we tend to move through it fairly quickly and then move on to something else. We settle for generic gratitude and the same words

we've heard and said before. But what if we put our heart into praising God in the way the writer of Psalm 111 learned to?

How might that change our lives? It would, I feel that's certain. Because, you know, "God does not *need* our praise... but to gain a healthy spiritual self-understanding, we need to remember that our lives are set in the midst of an unimaginable greatness and goodness." (Parker, p. 298)

This Psalm invites us into awareness and wonder, into a perspective bigger than our own small worlds, routines, and habits.

Why not spend time, be exhaustive and thorough, notice the blessings big and small? Why not say thanks for the farmer's market bounty and sunflowers and the monarch butterfly, for the ability to get out of bed and make choices about the day, for laughter and fun, for good advice received at the right time, for kind strangers, for the particular people who are always there for you, for the communities in which you have a place, for help through that scary time, for the strength that comes from faith, for forgiveness and second chances?

Why not be similarly broad and deep in praise?

Why not praise God by recalling your whole experience of who God *is*, what God is *like*? Praise God for God's patience, quiet presence, immensity, nearness, wild and extravagant creativity, generosity, guidance, correction, compassion... for sharing our humanity.. for the mystery and unending love that is our God.

How might it change our lives to cultivate that awareness, not just of God's presence, but of the myriad ways in which that presence is made known to us? Not in a vague sort of way, but with enough attention to give *words* to our thanks and praise?

Psalm 111 seems to suggest that praise - being in awe of God, and giving expression to that awe - is the foundation of a life of wisdom. And that, we should note, is much more than head knowledge. In the Old Testament "wisdom" means faithful living.

That's where Psalm 111 leaves us... and that's where Psalm 112 picks up. I urge you to go home and read both these psalms. Psalm 111 and 112 are a pair. They go together; more than likely they were written by the same person. Psalm 112 is also an acrostic psalm, also made up of 22 alphabetic phrases but with a different focus. Psalm 112 follows up on the comprehensive praise of Psalm 111 with a comprehensive description of the wise and faithful life that praise leads to.

It describes the people of God as delighting in God's commandments, being a light in darkness, as gracious, merciful, generous, just, steady, and courageous.

It all begins with praise: our delight in and awe of God and God's work draw us closer to God. And then... God's work inspires our work. God's justice directs us toward justice. God's compassion moves us to compassion. God's generosity prompts us to be generous to others. God's holiness invites us to holiness. God's faithfulness makes it possible for us to be faithful.

Where might thanksgiving and praise lead us? I don't know; but it seems like it might be a path worth exploring. Why not?

Norm Carlson reminded me of the hymn that we are going to sing, which is based on Psalm 136. Its words were written by the great English poet John Milton, around the year 1624, at the tender age of about 16. Now we are only going to sing four verses, but the whole poem actually has 27 stanzas! (Yes, I was a little tempted to make you sing them all, but I won't. You can look them up, however!)

It starts out like this:

“ Let us with a gladsome mind, praise the Lord who is so kind: for God's mercies shall endure, ever faithful ever sure”

...and goes on to talk about God making heaven and earth, about various ways God helped the people of Israel to escape from slavery in Egypt and survive in the wilderness, about rescue from oppression, about forgiveness. Here are just a couple of stanzas I especially like:

That by his all-commanding might,
Did fill the new-made world with light;
For his mercies, shall endure, ever faithful, ever sure

And caused the golden-tressèd Sun
All the day long his course to run;
For his mercies shall endure, ever faithful, ever sure.

The hornèd Moon to shine by night
Amongst her spangled sisters bright;
For his mercies shall endure, ever faithful, ever sure.

Three verses all about the beauty of light.

There is so much to say “thank you” for, so many reasons to praise our amazing God.

As we sing, let's remember that we are only beginning.

Amen.

Resources:

Article by Thomas D. Parker in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, volume 1.