

## **“PRAISE PARTY”**

Psalm 8, Psalm 145

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Psalm 148 is just a really fun text! We don't often get to say that. The Bible can be comforting, beautiful, or inspiring. It's also serious, thought-provoking, and challenging. It tells us uncomfortable truths about ourselves and sometimes calls us to things we are reluctant to do. But “fun” isn't a word we use about scripture a lot. This text, though, makes me smile, every time.

It gives us all these images, one after the other, and when you read it, you picture the sea monsters, the oceans, fire, rain, birds, reptiles, other animals, mountains, all of it... somehow – in some way that defies explanation - united in praising God. These images fill our minds with a sense of wonder at the beauty, the variety, in the world around us, the *aliveness* of everything God has made.

This Psalm is a great example of how Hebrew poetry works. Besides the evocative, imagistic language, there's repetition of important words, phrases, and ideas: ALL things, all creatures, all mountains.... “Come praise the Lord,” “come praise the Lord.”

The paired expressions are also typical of Hebrew poetry: sun and moon, fire and hail, fruit trees and cedars, reptiles and birds. This provides a kind of balance and symmetry.

And even in translation you can feel that the words have a rhythm to them; this would have been set to music and sung. It's easy to imagine, isn't it? People gathering, perhaps walking together in a procession to the temple – or maybe dancing, even – as they sang. Like all good poems and songs, there's powerful feeling in the words – this isn't primarily instructional or intellectual, but emotional... and the mood of it is joyous.

It's a joyful song of praise to God as the Creator of all things, and at the same time it's a joyful celebration of all that God has created in the world. What the poem (or song) envisions is everything in creation, from snowstorms to mountains to fruit trees to people young and old, giving praise to God. Why? Because God made them, and they belong to God, answer to God, obey God... and just by being what they are, they give praise to God. Notice what is understood here: each creature, created thing, or natural process has its own value, its own place. This is not about the *usefulness* of these creature, things, and phenomena for human beings but about the relationship of each one to God its Creator. It's a praise party, and everyone, everything is invited!

It's an inclusive invitation, not by any means an exhaustive guest list. The person or people who wrote and first sang this psalm included in it animals and features of the natural world that they were familiar with. Obviously, there are many, many more created things and beings which

demonstrate God's goodness. I hear the psalm as sort of open-ended; an invitation, not just to join the praise party, but be part of a continual unfolding of the psalm itself, to add to its expressions of praise. To build on it, to be creative and even playful with it, to use our imaginations (and our observations of the world) as we ask, "who else, what else, is part of this party, giving joyful praise to God?" We can do that in the style of Hebrew poetry, adding our own pairs of words describing other creatures or things in the world that give praise to God.

I might say "Flowers and fish" or "moonbeams and rainbows" ...Let them praise God!  
Or "artists and engineers," "rocks and rivers" ...Let them praise God!  
What would *you* add?  
Whatever those things, creatures, or forces may be... Let them praise God!

This is scripture not just as words on the page but as the Word, dynamic, alive in our breath and in our hearts, in our midst and our lives and our world.

When we did this at a worship service Jerry and I attended a couple of weeks ago, one of the small children there said "peanut butter and jelly." ☺ Well, why not? Doesn't every good things in the worship speak somehow about the goodness and generosity of God? Can we always explain how? Do we always understand? No. But remember that this is song, poetry; it reflects all the mysteries we can't comprehend about God's goodness and care for the world. This is about praise, joy, fun. It's heart and spirit, more than mind and will.

Still there are some things worth thinking about here: Notice that in this psalm at least, humans are a little late to the praise party – mentioned only after oceans and mountains, various kinds of weather, wild and tame animals, and trees. We join them, not the other way around!

What might this suggest? Perhaps that our role here should involve more humility and less hubris. Maybe we human beings need to practice seeing ourselves as part of the created world, rather than separate from it or above it; as partners and stewards, rather than conquerors and consumers. Maybe we need to pay more attention and cultivate respect for the diverse voices of creation, all the ways creation praises God. Maybe we need to let ourselves be free to join in the joy.

Now you might be thinking (because you're serious about living your faith): "what about climate change? what about air pollution and toxic waste and contaminated land and water? what about habitat destruction, species extinction, and invasive species? what about the unmanageable amount of trash being produced every day? Not to mention all the unequal and unjust ways this all impacts the most vulnerable communities?"

I want to read you a little bit of what author and observer of nature Margaret Renkl writes about springtime.

I treasure every Iridescent green bee waking to feed on the first vanishing bloodroot flower, the first ephemeral spring beauty, the first woodland violet.... Soon there will be trilliums and trout lilies, too. ...

If you tell me I don't deserve this joy, you are telling me nothing I don't already know. From the very first hominid to rise up on bare feet and stumble across a field of blooming grass, we have been burning this world down. I know that. I am in love with the mild light of the coming springtime anyway, with the shivering joy of the coming springtime, with all the beguiling creatures of the coming springtime.

Come to the woods and stand with me in the sunshine beneath the trees. Watch the bluebirds diving for insects. Watch them peeking into the nest holes the woodpeckers carved out years ago. Listen to the cry of the woodpeckers in the echoing woods. Let it lift your heart. Let it still your busy hands and feet, and let it still your worried minds. Listen with everything you are. With all you are, listen for the hum and flutter of the waking world. The upland chorus frogs are singing. It is a song of full-throated promise. ...

The world is burning, and there is no time to put down the water buckets. For just an hour, put down the water buckets anyway. Take your cue from the bluebirds, who have no faith in the future, but build the future nevertheless, leaf by leaf and straw by straw, shaping them into the roundness of the world.

Turn your face up to the sky. Listen. The world is trembling into possibility. (p. 56-57)

Because we have read Psalm 148, we can walk out into the trembling possibilities of springtime and see that the leaf and the bluebird, the insects and the violets, each in their own way is declaring the praise of God. Let all things praise God! Let them. *Let them*. Let them have their voice; who are we to dismiss or stifle it?

Hubris has so often and for so long caused us to disregard the ways the rest of God's creation speaks of God's wisdom and goodness. Hubris has also made us think we are too busy to pause and listen, too important to be a part of it, too serious for joy. What a lot we have missed! But what a lot of joy is on offer to us, if we choose to be part of the praise party.

Yes, we who are concerned with earth care have serious work to do. But Psalm 148 invites us into joy, solidarity, and love that can sustain us in that work. Take this Psalm with you today. Build on its invitation to praise. Look for all the creatures, things, processes, and people whose very being proclaim God's goodness. Look for opportunities to enlarge the praise party, so that all of us – everyone and everything – can praise the name of the Lord. Amen

Resources:

sermon by Paul Vasile, Ferncliff Camp and Conference Center, April 7, 2024  
*The Comfort of Crows*, by Margaret Renkl