

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church
September 2, 2012
Reflection on Psalm 150
4th and final in the series
“Take it to God in Prayer”

“Praise the Lord”

I began this series on prayer 4 weeks ago because many people have commented to me through the years that they just don't know how to pray. One of the things I've tried to do in worship these past 4 weeks is practice praying . . .not just explain to you how to pray. Last week we tightened our fists in a psalm of lament; two weeks ago we meditated on the words of psalm 23 which were followed by the Unity Singers beautiful “Lord, Have Mercy Upon Us”. Three weeks ago I taught you the ACTS way of praying.

Today, we're practicing our prayers of Thanksgiving . . .thanking God for everything in our lives . . .from the beauty of the creation . . .to the country in which we live . . .to the jobs which we keep us busy . . .and the spiritual practices and church which feeds our souls . . .to the family and friends who surround us . . . we have so much for which to thank God.

Someone once said that Psalm 150 is the exclamation point of the psalms. And that it surely is.

Thinking about how the Book of Psalms ends got me to thinking about other endings and how important they are. I thought about the number of times I have kissed children good night and told them I loved them. I thought about how we end our services with a benediction, which is the church's way of saying “May you know the love of God as you go about your business this week.” I thought about how relationships end, either with people or employers or institutions, and how important those endings are. A bad ending can stay with you forever and linger like a cloud, but a good ending can bring closure to what was a bad situation. Endings make a difference.

And so it is with the book of psalms. Had the book ended with a psalm of lament, there would be this lingering thought of “is there no hope”? But because it ends with praise, and exuberant praise at that, there's no doubt that there is hope, that there's always hope. Indeed, that all prayers, and all of life, end with hope.

As Eugene Peterson writes:

(Psalm 150) This is not a 'word of praise' slapped onto whatever mess we are in at the moment. This crafted conclusion of the Psalms tells us that our prayers are going to end in praise, but that it is also going to take awhile. Don't rush it. It may take years, decades even, before certain prayers arrive at the hallelujahs....Not every prayer is capped off with praise. In fact most prayers, if the Psalter is a true guide, are not.

But the psalmist isn't singing God's praises with rose-colored glasses on. This is not a "gee, isn't life swell" sort of praise where we put on our happy plastic face and pretend everything is hunky-dory 100% of the time. Because we know that things aren't. Life is messy, things happen, sometimes there are valleys. Not every day has a mountaintop moment.

Remember, Psalm 150 caps off a book that plumbs the depths of human sorrow. The Psalmist knows real life. The psalmist isn't naïve. The psalmist knows that ships sail through storms. But the psalmist also has faith that at the other end of the storm, a new shore awaits us. And the reason why the psalmist can proclaim God's praises with such exuberance is because he (or she) has kept praying. Through the good times *and the bad times*; through the times of laughter *and the times of tears*; through the times of great faith *and the times of lingering doubts*; the psalmist has kept at it, hasn't let go of God. Has kept talking with God and wrangling with God and trusting God and finally praising God . . .and therefore has grown closer to God. The psalmist knows something that I suspect many of us forget, and that is that relationships take work, even our relationship with God.

Again, Eugene Peterson writes:

If we persist in prayer, laugh and cry, doubt and believe, struggle and dance and then struggle again, we will surely end up at Psalm 150, on our feet, applauding, "Encore! Encore!" (Eugene Peterson, *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer* (Harper & Row, 1989), p. 127)

But prayer, a praying life, finally becomes praise. Prayer is always reaching towards praise and will finally arrive there.

That is the movement of the Christian life, from life to death to life again.

Think about it this way:

On rainy weekends we can thank God for the beauty of creation because we've lived through a horrible drought.

A hymn writer can write about how beautiful his country is, because he has seen the devastating effects of war.

We can stand with the church and praise God from whom all blessings flow, eat the common meal, and sing our praises, because we've experienced hardship.

We can thank God for friends and family because we've experienced the pain of losing someone we love.

And we can thank God for our jobs because we know so many people who are without one, or we ourselves have been jobless.

Because we have walked through the valleys, our prayers of thanksgiving are authentic.

It's telling that Psalm 150 is normally heard in church on the 2nd Sunday of Easter. Not Easter when everything is glorious and the place is full and the minister and choir and musician have pulled out all the stops, but the second Sunday of Easter, what we know in the trade as "low Sunday" and the faithful few who do come hear the story of Doubting Thomas.

With the crowds diminished and the lillies getting brown it's easy to wonder, just like Thomas, was he really raised? Is there really life after death? Is there a reason to hope in the face of lament?

This psalm answers a resounding YES!

Because we are an Easter people, and 'Hallelujah' is our song! With the psalmist, with doubting Thomas, and with all who have known pain and sorrow, we rejoice in the triumph of the God of life and we join in the chorus: "Praise the Lord! Praise God in his sanctuary...Praise him with trumpet sound...Praise him with clanging cymbals...Let everything that has breath praise the Lord! Hallelujah!"

Amen.