Summer Psalms Series, Psalm 146: A Psalm of Praise

July 5, 2015

This is the last in our series on the psalms. Here’s just a reminder of the psalms that we have studied. We looked at an introductory psalm, Psalm 1. You remember the psalmist says, Blessed is the one who studies God’s Word, and who applies it. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water. And do you remember I reminded us that the water that we are planted in is the living water that is Christ. We are trees that through the grace and mercy of God, bear fruit for the world.

We then looked at Psalm 113, a psalm of praise; Psalm 69, a psalm of lament (Save me, O God, the water is up to my neck!) We studied Psalm 27, a psalm of trust, where the psalmist is beginning to look past his enemies to God’s presence and deliverance (The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?) And then last week we studied Psalm 40, a psalm of thanksgiving. The crisis has passed. And the psalmist says, I will sing a new song to God. In fact, let me tell you a story of how God delivered me! Today we are bookending the series with another psalm of praise, Psalm 146.

We also have talked about how the psalms follow the rhythm of life: sometimes in life we find ourselves in what Walter Brueggemann calls orientation, where things are good, blessings are easy to name. And then the bottom falls out: we get a difficult diagnosis; we lose our job, a relationship ends. And we wonder what God is up to; we struggle to trust. Then God brings deliverance, and we are reoriented. Things are not the same, because they can never be the same, but God has taken us out of the miry bog and set our feet on firm ground again. One of the traits of this new place, this reorientation, is that the scars that we have are places of strength that can help others. And now we have a story to tell.

So today is another psalm of praise, to bookend the beginning of the series. In fact, the last six psalms in the psalter, 145-150, are psalms of praise. It’s like at the end of a fireworks show, when you end with everything you’ve got. It’s this huge chorus of praise at the end of the psalms. Each one of the last five psalms starts with, Praise the Lord!
So Psalm 146 starts out with these words: Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord, O my soul! I will praise the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God all my life long. (Ps. 146:1-2) When the psalmist says, Praise the Lord, he is addressing the whole congregation. It’s as if the psalmist is saying, Praise the Lord, everybody! But then he makes it personal. He says, Praise the Lord, O my soul! He reminds himself that he needs to praise God. He says, I will praise the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God all my life long.

We’re reminded of Paul, who is in prison, writing to the Philippian Christians, when he says: Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. (Phil. 4:4) Paul says, I’m not going to wait to rejoice until circumstances are better. I choose to rejoice now, in these circumstances. Not for these circumstances, but in these circumstances.

In the first chapter of Philippians, Paul even says that his bring in prison has turned out to be a good thing for the gospel, because members of the Roman guard are hearing about Jesus. He is not going to wait to rejoice!

The psalmist says, I will not wait until I am in the mood to praise God. I will not wait until I am cheerful enough to praise God. I will not let the circumstances of my life decide whether or not to praise God. I will make the choice to praise God as long as I live! I will sing praises to my God all my life long. I hope sometimes you leave this worship service with the phrase of a hymn dancing around in your mind. I hope that sometimes you leave this place with a praise chorus that has lodged in your heart and your mind and you can’t seem to shake it. And it keeps coming back to you, reminding you of God’s faithfulness or God’s love or God’s forgiveness. The psalmist says, I will sing praises to my God all my life long.

And then the psalmist says, Do not put your trust in rulers, in mortals, in whom there is no help. When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish. That seems like an odd transition to me, going from praise to not trusting in rulers.

Some scholars think that this psalm was written when the Jewish exiles had come back from Babylon. The Persian king Cyrus, who released them from exile, had told them he supported them rebuilding the Temple, which had been destroyed by the Babylonians. But there was opposition by some of the Jews who had stayed in
the land and who had intermarried. The opposition was bribing local officials to put a stop to the work. So there was disappointment by the Jews in the ruler Cyrus. He wasn’t able to help them like they thought he would. (Ezra 4)

So the psalmist says, Don’t put your trust in princes. Rulers will let you down. We’re discovering that this ruler Cyrus can’t help us. The psalmist is saying, Go ahead and praise God, because God can be trusted. But if you place your trust in anybody else, you’re going to be let down. Now obviously the psalmist is making a case for God’s faithfulness. And like any good rhetorician, he is pushing things to make a point. But we do place our trust in other people and institutions all the time, don’t we? And many times they come through, and sometimes they let us down.

On Friday, I called the Marriott Hotel in Detroit to confirm our reservations for the National Youth Gathering, and discovered that in a misunderstanding, they had given two of our three rooms away. Yikes! So after an hour-plus on the phone with a very helpful Marriott staff person, I obtained two more rooms at a Marriott across the street for the same price. I had put my trust in mortals at the Marriott, and somebody there let me down. The good news is that somebody else reaffirmed my trust in the Marriott hotel chain.

The psalmist says, God is the only one we can totally trust to be faithful. God is the one we can always praise. Because you know what happens: we place our trust in companies that let us down as consumers; we place our trust in employers who sometimes disappoint us. We place our trust in elected officials who can let us down. Neighbors can let us down; pastors, including this one, can let you down. Every human institution and every person can disappoint. God alone is the one totally worthy of praise, because God is totally faithful.

Then the psalmist says, Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever…

I love that God is identified as the God of Jacob. To whom do we give praise? To the God of Jacob. Do you remember who Jacob was? He was the younger twin brother of Esau. Jacob was holding onto Esau’s foot when Esau was born. Talk about a symbol, right? He was a grabber, a grasper.
He was the one who cheated his brother out of his birthright and his inheritance. He was the one who settled elsewhere for 20 years, to get away from his brother whom he had cheated. And then when he moves back to the land, he finds out that Esau is coming to greet him, with 400 armed men. Uh-oh…He rightfully thinks that maybe Esau wants revenge. So what does he do? He sends some of his wives and children and slaves and cattle back towards Esau to see how Esau will treat them. And if they get treated ok, he’ll come himself. Nice, huh?

And the night before he meets his brother, God sends a heavenly being to meet him, and Jacob wrestles with him all night long. Jacob is the man who struggles with God. In fact, after God wrestles with Jacob, and gets his thigh put out of joint, God gives Jacob a new name. Because when we wrestle with God, we come out changed. Now he is no longer Jacob, the supplanter, the one who cheats someone out of something, he is Israel, the one who strives with God.

So to whom do we give praise? To the God of Jacob. To the God who doesn’t give up on us. To the God who gives second and third and fourth chances. To the God who reaches out to the doubter, and that’s all of us at one time or another, isn’t it? That God, the God of Jacob, is the God who we give praise to.

The psalmist says, Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God. Our hope is in he Lord God. When I think of hope, I think of the woman in Mark chapter five who has had an issue of blood for twelve years. The Law of Moses said that made her ritually unclean; she can’t be around people. She’s been on the edge of community for twelve years.

She’s tried every doctor; she's tried every cure, and nothing has been effective. And then she hears about this rabbi Jesus of Nazareth who is coming through town. She moves to the edge of the crowd as he is passing through. She stands there in hopefulness. She realizes she has to be closer, so she begins to make her way through the crowd. People part in front of her because they know her, they understand that she is a pariah, and they don’t want to become ritually unclean.

And when she gets close enough to Jesus, as he is passing by, she touches the fringe of his garment. She has moved through the crowd in hope. She reaches out in hope. She touches his garment in hope. And when Jesus realizes that power has left his body, he says, Who touched me?
The disciples say, Lord, there is a ton of people around you. Everybody is touching you. Everybody wants a piece of you. But Jesus says, No, somebody touched me in hope. Somebody touched me trusting that something would happen.

And the woman realizes she is being called out, and she falls to his feet, and tells him the whole story. And he says to this woman, this outcast, this pariah, Daughter, your faith as made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease. He calls her daughter. He brings her back into the fold. She has spent twelve years being marginalized, and now what she had hoped has been realized. The psalmist says, Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God…

Earlier in the psalm, the psalmist says, Don’t put any trust in rulers, because rulers will let you down. But rulers make decisions, don’t they, and sometimes they please us and sometimes they don’t. Many of us last week saw hope realized in the Supreme Court decision that allows marriage for same-gender folks. Like that woman in the crowd, this has been a community that has been on the edges, living in hope that someday they, created in God’s image, could be affirmed. I know we are still a divided country on this, I know we are a divided denomination; we have differing views among us in this congregation. If you’d like to have a cup of coffee with me, preferably a cold frappaccino, I would be glad to discuss biblical and theological underpinnings for why I rejoice in that decision. And you can share your thoughts with me.

The psalmist goes on to describe whom this God is that is worthy of praise: this is the God “who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever; who executes justice for the oppressed, who give food to the hungry. The Lord sets the prisoners free; the Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down; the Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin. Notice it is the way of the wicked God brings to ruin.”

Christ will be the one who judges the ones the psalmist calls wicked and the ones he calls righteous.

God is on the side of the struggler, the outsider, the vulnerable and weak one, the marginalized, the stranger. That’s God’s outreach program. When two of John the
Baptist’s disciples come to Jesus and ask, Are you the one who is to come, are you God’s chosen one, or should we wait for somebody else, Jesus says, Go and tell John what you see and hear: the blind, both physically and spiritually blind, receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. Jesus says, Go and tell John, This is what the kingdom looks like. God’s doing a new thing in me.

So as we close this series on the psalms, let me share what I praise God for: I praise the God who is at work in hidden and not so hidden ways all around us. I praise the God who reaches out to love and care for people different from me. I praise the God of Jacob, who gives us second and third and fourth chances. I praise the God who wrestles with us towards new understandings. In the words of the psalmist: Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord, O my soul! I will praise the Lord as long as I live. I will sing praises to my God all my life long. Amen.