

Psalm 146 - Let Everything that Lives Praise the Lord

Today is the last Sunday of our five-week sermon series on psalms. We started with a psalm of thanksgiving, followed by a psalm of lament, a psalm of trust, a psalm of thanksgiving, and today we close with a psalm of praise. Hopefully this has expanded your understanding of the Book of Psalms, or Psalter.

The editor of the Psalms organized the collection into five “books”, each of which ends with a summons to praise, or a doxology, which is a hymn of praise. The last of these calls to praise is Psalm 150 which ends not only the fifth “book” of the Psalter, but also the entire Psalter. The closing quintet of five hymns of praise begins with Psalm 146, with its opening summons to “Praise the Lord!” Similarly, each of the last five psalms in the Psalter begins with: “Praise the Lord!” or in Hebrew, “Hallelujah!”

“Hallelu” is actually the plural imperative of the verb “hallel”. An imperative is an obligation. And “jah” (yah) is shorthand for the personal name of God, Yahweh. So, “Hallelujah” is translated as “You all praise Yahweh!” It’s an imperative, it is an obligation. It is a call not to an individual hearer or reader, but to the whole community.

The final five psalms of the Psalter, 146 to 150, are known as the “Final Hallel” of the book of Psalms. Each of the last five psalms begins and ends with the words “hallelujah” – “praise Yahweh” or “praise the Lord”, and together they expand the praise of God from the individual psalm singer, to the people of Israel, and to all creation.

This collection of five psalms presents us with an overpowering expression of all parts of creation proclaiming praise. However, at the start of today's psalm, the first of the collection, those cosmic dimensions have not quite been reached. This is an individual psalm, an 'I' psalm, where one individual sings that praise. It is a reminder that the praise of God is itself something that starts in both small and sometimes lonely places.

Psalm 145 which precedes today's psalm ends with the words, "The praise of the Lord my mouth will speak, and all flesh will bless his holy name for all time and beyond." And in the five psalms that follow, that is precisely what takes place. The circle of those invited to praise in this closing quintet is continually expanding. First, the individual calls himself to praise ("*Let all that I am*") and resolves to do so, "*I will praise the Lord as long as I live. I will sing praises to my God with my dying breath.*" These last five psalms finally describe 'all flesh praising the Lord'.

Each of these final psalms, like a crescendo in music, adds to the voices which praise the Lord: first the psalmist, then Jerusalem, then all in heaven and earth, then the faithful in Zion and Israel, and finally, the quintet closes with an invitation to 'everything that breathes' to join the praising. Various dimensions of praise are evident in this movement: personal, community, political, and liturgical.

The psalm began with a vow to praise the Lord by the psalmist, in the first person singular. Praise is a life-long enterprise for this psalmist. It is something to which the psalmist commits themselves 'life-long', but

praise of the Lord is also something that the whole of life of the individual proclaims. Praise is not just the aim of life, but life itself is praise.

Praise is also related to trust and confidence, so the psalmist turns to the 'negative' side of this statement: "don't put your confidence in powerful people; there is no help for you there." These are the ones in whom one ought not to put their trust, or whom they should praise. It is useless trusting in human leaders because they are temporary: "When they breathe their last, they return to the earth, and all their plans die with them." While the individual psalmist says these words, they are spoken to the community at large.

The structure of this psalm exhibits the usual two-part pattern of the hymn. It begins with a *call to praise* and supplies a number of *reasons for* praising along with some words of *instruction*. The final verse, much like last week's psalm of thanksgiving consists of a confession of faith: "*The Lord will reign forever. He will be your God, O Jerusalem, throughout the generations*", ending with a final call to "Praise the Lord".

The opening verses had suggested a kind of allegiance that will never disappoint. Here is a trust in God that can be expressed in praise for a whole lifetime! The psalmist then warns against giving our *ultimate* allegiance to any human institution. Political leaders, even kings and princes are human, with all the faults and limitations that are common to humans. And these leaders won't be around forever. They are mortals which in Hebrew is *adam*, who will one day die and return to

the earth or in Hebrew *adamah*. This Hebrew play on words - *adam* returning to *adamah* could be reproduced in English by saying they are *humans* and will return to the *humus*. One day the breath of these kings and politicians, which in the Hebrew is often translated as "wind", will stop blowing and the promises and platforms and plans of these windbags will disappear with them.

The Book of Psalms began with a promise of the joy that is found in the people of God and now concludes with the same promise. The reasons for happiness are stated clearly: such persons know that their help (for the present) and their hope (for the future) are with the Lord their God, who is the *creator* of the heavens, the earth, and the sea.

Then some of the fundamentally important words used to describe God are offered. God keeps *faith* forever and executes *justice* for the oppressed and the hungry. Happy is the person who has this God! "*Joyful are those who have the God of Israel as their helper, whose hope is in the Lord their God.*" This introduces a list of divine attributes for which the Lord ought to be praised. The first part of the list relates to the creative work of the Lord: "*He made heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them.*" Then the list moves to matters of truth and justice, and finally bread for the hungry: "*He gives justice to the oppressed and food to the hungry.*" The psalm continues with God's dealing with those who are weighed down, finishing with care for the orphan and widow. This latter care is contrasted with the way of the wicked. "Don't put your confidence in powerful people." The psalm ends with a statement about the Lord's kingship and the final *hallelujah*.

In the tradition of the great prophets, the psalmist declares the Lord's special concern for the widow, the orphan, the oppressed, the hungry and the foreigner or alien, contrasting the lifestyles of the righteous and the wicked. The psalm ends with words of confidence in the reign of God over all creation: *“For the Lord is good. His unfailing love continues forever.”* But how does the reign of God work itself out in this world, in our world? What does it mean to trust in God to give bread to the hungry, to watch over the strangers, and to open the eyes of the blind?

Throughout most of the story of the Old Testament, our ancestors in the faith had a king. First Saul, then David and Solomon, and then others like Rehoboam and Hezekiah and Josiah. Over and over we read in the prophetic books that a major role of the king in ancient Israel, and in other cultures in the ancient Near East, was to provide justice for those who were oppressed, to give food to those who were hungry, to set prisoners free, to lift up those who were weighted down, to watch over foreigners, and to support the orphan and the widow.

These are familiar words. In Luke’s Gospel, John the Baptist sent two of his disciples to ask Jesus if he was the Messiah, or were they to wait for someone else. Then Jesus told John’s disciples, “Go back to John and tell him what you have seen and heard — the blind see, the lame walk, those with leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, and the Good News is being preached to the poor.” Then he added, “God blesses those who are not offended by me.”

Israel's law and prophets called the nation to account for its treatment

of the most vulnerable members of society, and we can see the obvious connection with Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. God's providence is praised not only in Jesus' miracles, which are the first fruits of the restoration; it is also profoundly united to our understanding of the incarnation and crucifixion, in Jesus' complete identification with humankind and his complete self-giving.

The role of the king was to provide a “place” for the people of the kingdom to live and flourish in safety and care and comfort. Unfortunately the kings of Israel didn't do a very good job of fulfilling their God-given kingly duties, and by the time this psalm was composed, the Israelite people had been taken into captivity by the Babylonians, Jerusalem and the temple had been destroyed, and no king ruled over Israel.

"Princes and rulers" come under particular indictment because, as nobles, they were in a position to effect change for the poor and oppressed, much like today's politicians. The prophets often laid responsibility for Israel's woes at the feet of its various leaders. Yahweh's royal office is highlighted, because he alone enacts true justice within history, just like Jesus in Luke's Gospel.

The themes and thoughts of this final great doxology are by no means new in the book of Psalms. This psalm echoes those earlier psalms which question placing trust in princes and others who seem to have power to offer salvation. We could replace 'princes' with political parties, financial security, or national security policies.

So what were the Israelites to do? They were captives in Babylon. In the face of destruction, and the end of the kingdom and nation founded by David, God could and would be ruler over the people. As another psalm clearly states, *“The Lord is king! Let the earth rejoice; let the many coast-lands be glad!”*

The psalmist reminds us that God, the creator of the heavens and the earth and the sea and all that is in them, will care for the heavens and the earth and the sea and all that is in them better than any earthly king in Israel’s past had ever done. Better than anyone who is rich and powerful, better than any princes.

How will God go about performing these “caring” duties? How will God support the orphan and the widow? How will God give bread to those who are hungry? How will God set the prisoners free? How will God care for the wonderful world God has created? ... Through people like us! We are all called to care for this world, for God’s creation and its inhabitants, to be the arms and legs, hands and feet, eyes and ears, voice and heart of God. How else will God’s presence be known and felt in the world?

This Psalm started as a personal commitment by the Psalmist; praising God throughout his life and on into eternity, as he moved from one life into another life with God. As Isaac Watts, the hymn writer wrote: *“I’ll praise my maker while I’ve breath, and when my voice is lost in death, praise shall employ my nobler powers: my days of praise shall ne’er be past, while life, and thought, and being last, or immortality endures...”* Many of our faith convictions find honest

expression in in these words as well as the writings of many others! Ancient writers give us words to express ourselves and the Psalms give us the words we need to pray!

The Psalmist collected these individual experiences and expressions to provide a mutual song of praise to our redeeming God, and attempted to list the things we should all be grateful for to our God. He also gave a warning to be on guard against powerful and manipulative people.

The Psalmists and hymn writers claim, just as we all should, that our trust can only truly be placed in God! Sometimes though, we find it hard to see God at work in the world where there is so much pain, injustice, oppression and greed in nations' and people's lives! Yet, we will find that just as we gain hope in God's presence — so we have to trust in God's powers to bring justice, mercy and peace to God's people. Just as we rely on God's strength, so we must rely on God's promises.

God is obviously there for the long haul along with all God's creation. Our view of life and its purposes on this planet is finite, whereas God's overview and involvement is infinite. We should be content to leave things in God's hands, trusting that our God will reign forever over every generation, from the beginning of time, until its ending and final consummation.

The Psalter ends with an extended call to praise; five psalms of praise bring the Psalter to an astounding peal of praise. Today's psalm calls

us to praise and invites us to trust. In the call to praise, the psalmist calls others to praise the Lord and at the same time exhorts himself to praise the Lord. In the reasons for praise, the psalmist emphasizes that the Lord is the only one in whom we can truly place our trust: "Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no trust."

The psalm then recounts God as both creator and deliverer: The one who made heaven and earth and sets the prisoners free, heals the sick, lifts up the oppressed. These acts are not universal; not everyone experiences every grace from God. The Psalmist knows that we grow sick, we can be killed, we are oppressed. But God moves in the midst of sufferings, sustaining God's people and pulling the beloved creation forward into God's preferred future. These acts of deliverance are representative of God's characteristic intrusions into a broken and suffering world.

The psalms invite us to come to worship in order that we might sing the songs in daily life. So, when we are wallowing neck deep in the mire of life, we are invited to sing the songs of lament: *O Lord, have mercy*. When we are experiencing the grace and joy of life, we are invited to sing the songs of praise: *Thank you God!*

When we are in a tough spot, but remember God's presence, we are invited to say, "I trust you O God, you are with me." And when we see God at work in the world, we are invited to point to God's invisible hand at work and say, "Praise the Lord!"

Let everything that lives praise the Lord! Amen! Hallelujah!

PRAYERS FOR SEPTEMBER 3, 2023

Creator and Redeemer, as we approach you in prayer, make us walk in beauty and balance. Make us open our hearts and minds. Make us speak the truth. We pray for your community, the Church, the Body of Christ. We pray for all our relatives in the circle of life throughout all Creation, for those chosen to be our leaders and teachers.

In peace, we pray to you, Lord God.

We call upon the Earth, our planet home, with its beautiful depths, soaring heights and deep waters, its vitality and abundance of life, and together we ask:

That it may teach us and show us the way.

We call upon the mountains and deserts, the high green valleys and meadows filled with wild flowers, the snows, the summits of intense silence, and we ask:

That they may teach us and show us the way.

We call upon the land which grows our food, the nurturing soil, the fertile fields, the abundant gardens and orchards, and we ask:

That they may teach us and show us the way.

We call upon the forests, the great trees reaching strongly to the sky with earth in their roots and the heavens in their branches, the fir and the pine and the cedar and we ask:

That they may teach us and show us the way.

We call upon the creatures of the fields and forests and the seas, our brothers and sisters the wolves and deer, the eagle and dove, the great whales and the dolphin. We ask:

That they may teach us and show us the way.

We call upon all those who have lived on this earth, our ancestors and our friends, who dreamed the best for future generations, and upon whose lives our lives are built, and with thanksgiving, we call upon them too ...

That they may teach us and show us the way.

We call upon the nations of the world to hear the cry of those who have suffered loss of homes, lives and hope because of climate change. May they hear the cry of those whose schools, churches, hospitals, roads and infrastructure have been damaged. We pray for justice and for peace. We ask:

That they may teach us and show us the way.

We pray for all victims of war and violence. We pray for countries where the greed for oil and gas are leading to war. We hold in our hearts those areas where fossil fuel projects have destabilised communities and human rights abuses have occurred. We pray for areas where climate change has led to drought or flooding, and conflict over water and resources is taking place. May we respond to the cry of the Earth and those living in poverty, as peacemakers who challenge the violence that threatens us all. We ask:

That they may teach us and show us the way.

We pray for Our Redeemer Lutheran, Penticton, as they celebrate their 60th Anniversary and Trinity Anglican + Lutheran Church and Pastor Brenda Nestegaard Paul in Port Alberni. We pray for our Bishops, pastors, deacons, and lay leaders as they lead their congregations in these challenging times of climate change and natural disasters around the world. We ask:

That they may teach us and show us the way.

We pray that God sustain those who respond when wildfires roar, keep them safe from harm and hold them in God's sheltering embrace so that they may complete these burdensome tasks, return home to their families, and keep the lives and homes of all they protect safe from

harm. We pray for all the evacuees, those who have lost their homes, and those waiting to return to survey the devastation, that you give them strength and hope to rebuild their lives and communities. We pray for the people of Florida, Georgia, South Carolina and North Carolina who have sustained flooding and losses. We ask:

That they may teach us and show us the way.

Creator, you made the world and declared it to be good: the beauty of the trees, the softness of the air, the fragrance of the grass speaks to us; the summit of the mountains, the thunder of the sky, the rhythm of the lakes speaks to us; the faintness of the stars, the freshness of the morning, the dewdrops on the flower speak to us. But above all, our heart soars, for you speak to us in Jesus the Christ, in whose name we offer these prayers. **Amen.**

LORD'S PRAYER *(Adapted from the New Zealand Book of Prayer)*
Together let us pray the Lord's Prayer:

Eternal Spirit, Earth-maker, Pain-bearer, Life-giver, Source of all that is and that shall be, Father and Mother of us all, Loving God, in Whom is heaven:

The hallowing of Your name echoes through the universe! The way of Your justice be followed by the peoples of the world! Your heavenly will be done by all created beings! Your beloved community of peace and freedom sustain our hope and come on earth.

With the bread we need for today, feed us. In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us. In times of temptation and test, strengthen us. From trials too great to endure, spare us. From the grip of all that is evil, free us. For You reign in the glory of the power that is love, now and forever.

Amen.