

February 5, 2017  
Psalm 148  
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**“Praise the Lord!”**

**Good morning! I’m glad all of you could be here to share some PB&J today. In case all the repetition hasn’t sunk in yet, the PB&J we’re talking about is Praise, Blessing, and Joy. In the next two weeks we’re going to be considering blessing and joy more specifically, but this morning we get to focus on praise.**

**Praise is, of course, something we ought to be doing every Sunday when we gather for worship, whether we name it or not. But I’d suggest that praise is more than something we do between 9:30 and 10:45 on Sunday mornings. It is not a chore to check off the To Do list for the week -- whew, I sang three songs and even raised my hands at the end, thank goodness that’s over with. Praise isn’t something we can have someone else do for us: Hey, could you take care of my praise today? I have to get ready to teach Sunday School. Praise doesn’t even depend on how we’re feeling -- whether it’s a bad day, or a long stretch of difficult days. I believe that praise is about who God is, and who God created us to be. We’ll see if you agree with me by the end of this sermon.**

**I’m going to try to give you something meatier than peanut butter this morning. I’m not a Hebrew scholar, but in order to understand Psalm 148, it’s helpful to understand a bit about the language and the culture from which it came. The book we know as Psalms in the Old Testament is a collection of 150 separate psalms: poems of lament and confession and thanksgiving and blessing and praise. The word *psalm* comes from a Greek term meaning “song.” In Hebrew, the language in which all the psalms were written, this collection is called *Tehillim*, or songs of praise. They are all poems, and some were set to music, although we no longer know what that music sounded like. These were songs and prayers which were part of worship and private**

prayers, and were organized into a collection of five books of psalms. They were likely written over several hundred years -- it's hard to tell exactly. Many of these psalms say they are written by King David -- it is quite unlikely that David wrote them all, or even wrote all the ones which have his name attached to them. But certainly some of these psalms were around as far back as the reign of King David and the beginning of the nation of Israel.

The Psalms end with a flourish: Book Five of the collection is just five psalms long: Psalm 146 through Psalm 150. They are called the "Hallel Psalms" because they each begin the same way: Halleluia! This translates from Hebrew as Praise the Lord! Some of you have heard me explain before that we lose a bit in the English translation; maybe it's because we've use the phrase Praise the Lord! Simply as an exclamation. As in, "I got my tax refund -- praise the Lord!" or even, "Church Board meeting is cancelled this month -- praise the Lord!" (we're still having Church Board meeting as far as know). You can decide whether it's appropriate to praise God in these circumstances, but when we use the phrase in that way, it loses the sense of being a command. It is a second person plural command -- that is, you -- all of you -- DO THIS. Like when the worship leader says "Please Stand!" You -- y'all -- praise the Lord! Of course that's the command we use for people. But Psalm 148 is not only for people.

If you have your Bibles, I invite you to turn to Psalm 148: we heard the Message version this morning, it doesn't matter which version you have with you. This psalm is commanding praise from all creation, in a very systematic way. That system is about the ancient Hebrew understanding of how the universe was put together. Any understanding of the earth and cosmos, including our own understanding, is called cosmology. Cosmetology is something else. Here's an illustration of Hebrew cosmology.

### **Slide 1 Hebrew Cosmology**

This is how the ancient Hebrews thought the universe was put together. If you think back to the creation stories in Genesis, we can see that sequence reflected here: first there was light, then a dome to separate the waters from the waters -- under the sky and over the sky,

and then the waters under the sky are separated into the seas and dry land. I won't go through the whole thing, but Psalm 148 goes through this exact same sequence. Beginning with God and the angels. If you're writing a poem and you want to describe *everything*, well, you can't just make a list of everything. That's not interesting, and it's way too much stuff. As comedian Steven Wright reminds us, "You can't have everything -- where would you put it?" It wouldn't work to simply list everything, so the psalmist describes categories of things: heavens, angels, sun moon and stars -- and throws in some interesting details for good measure: like sea dragons and fruit trees. Although the cosmology is a bit different, the intent is exactly the same as the spiritual, "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands" Do you remember some of those verses? We're singing about God, and the words are He's got the sun and the moon and the wind and the rain, and the little bitty baby, and you and me brother and sister. You can make up verses about anything you want, because from the highest heavens to the smallest and most vulnerable things on earth - - God has them all in his hands.

So, that is awesome that God has us all in His hands. But remember, this psalm begins with a command. And that command is ----? Praise the Lord! Is that command conditional? Praise the Lord if you're willing? Praise the Lord if the week has gone pretty well? Praise the Lord if you get up in time for church? No. It's really just a straight up command: praise the Lord because He is the one and only God, the God whose glory fills every place we can imagine, and He's the One who created you and every other living thing. Any questions?

Well, of course we have questions, we're human after all. This psalm doesn't tell us anything about *how* to praise the Lord, it just commands us to do it. We don't know exactly what worship looked like or what praise music sounded like when these psalms were collected. And that, I think, is one of the gifts of this psalm. We don't have to praise the Lord in any specific way for it to be praise. I love to sing, and I'm glad to have so many folks in the choir who share that passion; but you don't have to sing in a choir to praise the Lord. You don't have to play an instrument to praise the Lord -- although Psalm 150 suggests a bunch of instruments you can use, if you want. In fact, this psalm suggests that praise is not a prescription for what we do, it's the recognition of who we are -- or more accurately, *whose* we

**are. We are the people who God created, who are held in God's hands. And if God manages the sun and the moon and the sea dragons and the snow and the apple orchards and the snakes, then I think we're in pretty good hands, don't you? And where would we be without sun and rain and oceans and animals? We wouldn't last a day without God's provision. When we understand that we were created by God and we belong to God, then we can't help but praise God.**

**We can praise God in whatever way is natural for us, with whatever gifts God has given us. We can praise God through our work, we can praise God in our rest, we can praise God with art or accounting or caregiving or hospitality. Whatever we have to give, if we live it for the glory of God, then it is praise. Of course the inverse of that is true, as well: if we share something with a motive other than the glory of God, it is not praise. Not even, as we heard last week, extravagant offering of a thousand rams or ten thousand rivers of oil -- that's not what God wants. God wants us to acknowledge that we are his people and we belong to Him.**

**It's good for us to be together as brothers and sisters in Christ to be reminded that we are God's people and we belong to God. A worship service like this one is just one time and place that we can praise God, but we all need that time and place and it can be hard to do it on our own. I know that we have all kinds of things which get in the way of praising God: having schedules that are too full, poor health, financial struggles, bad relationships, the death of someone we love. These are real things, and coming to church doesn't change those real things. But when we come together in worship and offer our collective praise to God, we proclaim that we are not alone, and God will never abandon us. We proclaim this even when we don't feel like it, even when we're struggling to believe it. We praise God because God deserves our praise, but also because spreading praise changes us. This doesn't mean it changes our circumstances -- praise won't put money in our wallets or cure our illness or bring back the people we have lost to death, but praise reminds us that there is a whole world out there which is bigger than what we are experiencing, and God has got that whole world in his hands.**

**I visited with someone from Creekside this week who made a simple statement to me: I'm sure they didn't intend it to end up today's sermon. I don't know if you can agree with this, but I think it captures the idea of praise pretty neatly. Here's what this person said, "I've been better, and I've been worse; but I'm just grateful for what I have." If you can say that, then you have an attitude of praise, and you can start spreading that PB&J around. You -- all of you--praise the Lord! Amen.**