

September 10, 2017
Psalm 149
Pastor Rosanna McFadden
Creekside COB

“Everything Always”

Good morning! We have reason to be concerned for folks in our country and elsewhere in the world this morning -- during this service Hurricane Irma is making its way up the isthmus of Florida: this less than two weeks after Harvey slammed the Texas coast and flooded the area in and around Houston and parts of Louisiana. Hurricane Jose is on its way through parts of the Caribbean which were devastated by Irma, and Katia is on its way to Mexico, a country which is just recovering from a major earthquake. And that’s just the weather news -- it doesn’t include the threat of nuclear weapons in N Korea, the brutal war on drugs in the Philippines, immigration reform, Equifax security breaches, and Donald Trump Jr.’s pre-election meetings with a Russian lawyer: and that’s only the stuff I know about. There’s plenty of national and world upheaval that I don’t know about. I won’t go into the personal stuff which I have in my life, or the things you’ve told me about in yours: a few of those are listed under prayer requests, but I know that many of you are facing personal or family issues which I don’t know about either.

My purpose is not to convince you of how ignorant I am of world and personal affairs: there’s no way anyone can keep up on everything, always. What I want to talk about is where is God in all of this? Is God out in the cosmos somewhere, detached from it all; watching it all unfold from a distance? Or is God in control of every move we make, with foreknowledge of every word we -- and anyone else -- is going to say before it is even on our lips?

These are not simple questions, even for a preacher. Fortunately, I have the witness of other witnesses to lean on, and my own convictions to share with you. Our text is the entirety of Psalm 149. As you have heard me say before -- and some of you may even

remember -- this is one of the *Hallel* psalms. This is the group of psalms at the very end of the entire collection of 150 psalms: psalms 146 through 150, each of which begins with the command Praise the Lord! In Hebrew, the original language of the psalms, the imperative verb for praise is “hallel” and the object of that verb is the title “El,” or Lord. This command is written as a single word: Halleluia! Which means: You -- all of you -- Praise the Lord!

Psalm 149 is kind of the neglected child of the Hallel Psalms. It's sandwiched between the two most popular Hallel psalms. I won't read them in their entirety, but if you have a Bible, I invite you to turn there. Psalm 148 does this great thing where it goes through the Hebrew hierarchy of creation: the firmament, the angels, the sun and moon, all the way down through sea monsters and cedar to young women and how they're all supposed to praise the Lord. Everything, always.

Psalm 150 was written especially to put the exclamation point on the collection of 149 worship songs, and it lists many of the instruments which can be used to praise the Lord, including two kinds of cymbals: clanging symbols, and loud clashing cymbals. Generations of musicians have found validation in this psalm; if God loves loud clashing cymbals, God is probably OK with guitars and congas and accordions and zithers. Everything, always.

Psalm 149 is sandwiched between Psalm 148 and Psalm 150: what are the odds, right? It's more specific than the entire creation of 148, but broader than that list of instruments in 150. Psalm 149 is almost exclusively about *people*, and it asserts something important which is missing from Psalms 148 and 150. Psalm 149 says that God loves us back. Verse 4 says, “God takes pleasure in his people and adorns the humble with victory.” I think this is clue to the question of where is God in all of this? God did not simply set up creation and then walk away from it -- what people do matters to God. It probably doesn't affect the course of the stars or the moon, but God takes pleasure in people.

Perhaps not all people. Stay with me here, because this is sensitive ground we're about to step on to. Verse 4 talks about God taking pleasure his people, and then verse 6 says, “Let the high praise of

God be in their [that is, the people's] throats and two-edged swords in their hands, to execute vengeance on the nations and punishment on the peoples." How did high praise and vengeance and punishment get put together in the same sentence? When did two-edged swords get to be part of our praise? I think this, too, speaks to God's agency in the world, and it is why I cannot subscribe to the narrative of a God who has pre-ordained every move we make and every word we say. There is evil in the world and innocent people are abused and murdered. I cannot believe that God pre-ordains evil against the innocent. There are natural disasters and there are devout and righteous people as well as unrepentant sinners in the path of every wildfire, hurricane, and tornado which threaten anyone. Sometimes, the innocent and the unrepentant are the same people. None of us are entirely good or entirely evil; and anyone who thinks those groups of people can be neatly sorted is kidding themselves. Most of us have tried to do some good at least some of the time, and still we have sinned and fallen short. That's why we need Jesus Christ. That's a different testament and a different sermon.

I believe the witness of this psalm is that people matter to God. What we do matters to God: our praise, in which God takes pleasure, and our sin, which corrupts nations and oppresses other people, and brings vengeance on ourselves. I believe that we matter enough to God that God allows us to make choices about how we will behave. The witness of history is that we have made some terrible choices; that is why we need Jesus Christ. That's a different testament and a different sermon.

Here is the choice which the psalms -- especially these final psalms of the collection -- offer. You -- all of you -- praise the Lord! Not praise the Lord or someone will smite you with divine wrath, but praise the Lord because that is a tangible way that we present a counter-narrative to evil and death and destruction. All those woes which I listed at the beginning of this sermon -- they're all real things, but they are not the beginning and end of the story. If we make them the beginning and end of the story, we come up with a distorted image of God: a God who uses hurricanes to punish certain people in specific places. I cannot praise a God who would do that, and I will not listen to religious leaders who want to pick and choose what kinds of sin God is unhappy about in other people, and ignore the evil in their own

hearts. Praise for everything, always, is the antidote to the poison of making God a partner to my agenda.

There is a tangible sign of God's faithfulness to us, and God's commitment to be at work in the world and to be in relationship with people. Many of you, I hope, got a chance to see this rainbow on Wednesday evening. I was driving east from South Bend to Elkhart, and got to watch it develop -- in between glances at traffic on the bypass. It was one of the brightest rainbows I have ever seen. I drove to Creekside as quickly as I could; this is not the best photo I've seen of last week's rainbow, but it is one of my favorite places. It reminded me of another rainbow that I witnessed here with David and Ann, at the rehearsal dinner for our children's wedding, which was here at Creekside almost exactly two years ago. God is good, all the time.

Now, as then, the rainbow reminded me of the beauty of God's creation -- I know about light diffraction and water droplets -- it's still God's creation. It reminded me that God has promised to remain in relationship with humanity: God is not an absentee parent; God is not a puppet-maker who is pulling the strings which control our every move, but God is part of our lives and our world: everything, always. God loved us so much, that God chose to be part of our lives and part of our world as Jesus Christ. Another testament, another sermon.

Our first response to that kind of glory and that kind of love should be praise: praise for everything, always. Praise that rain doesn't last forever, praise that God has seen us through with the help of others along the way. Praise for wonder of creation, praise for tangible signs of God's faithfulness and love. Praise God from whom all blessing flow. Everything, always.