
It All Ends in Praise

Psalm 145

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on July 29, 2012 by the Rev. Bruce Puckett

I have a confession to make. It's always a bit tricky for preachers to begin their sermons making a confession, and it could make for quite an awkward twenty minutes. But don't worry; my confession is not one that will make you or me blush. My confession is this... brace yourself... I enjoy "praise and worship" music. You know what I'm talking about, right: the repetitious, simple, hand raising variety of songs that's been popular in some churches since the early 1980's. I know; it's hard to hear such blasphemy in a place that prizes the depth and richness of hymns and classical pieces of music in their original languages. (Something, I might add, which I have great fondness for as well.) Of course, I don't embrace "praise and worship" music uncritically any more than I would expect us here to embrace our more "traditional" music and worship uncritically. Yet, the truth is, there is something that stirs my heart when I sing the praise songs of my youth.

If you can handle it, I've got a bit more to confess. When I'm not in Chapel worship services, you just might see me raise my hands during a song or hear me say something like, "Amen" or "Praise the Lord" or "Hallelujah" when a preacher is really proclaiming God's message. And there have been times at this very Chapel where everything inside me wanted to exclaim aloud, "Amen," and have others around me say a word or two as well, after a glorious choir song or a powerful message. Sometimes a word of praise or thanksgiving or affirmation is perfectly fitting, and needed, even in a place like this.

Part of my appreciation for so called "Praise and Worship" music and the style of worship that often accompanies it is rooted in the participatory nature of such music. Because it's easy to sing and repetitious enough to remember, folks often are more willing to sing and are not too afraid to make their joyful noises unto the Lord. Additionally, proclaiming an affirmation, such as "Amen" or "Praise the Lord," at the end of a choir special or a preacher's sermon is a way these individual or small group acts can become a work of all the people. And, in this style of worship participation the act of praise is not limited to vocal utterances. Raising hands, standing, dancing, and clapping in praise of God, all become ways that people signify that our praise of God is not simply a spiritual or mental or emotional exercise, but it's something that involves our bodies and our actions as well. In a raised hand and an exclaimed, "Bless the Lord," we can see that praising God happens in word and in deed, in language and in life, in mind and in body.

Of course, there are problems with the kind worship with which I grew up. Because I spent most of my undergraduate years critiquing it, I could list many things. For your sake, I'll keep it to one. While there is an element of freedom expressed in individual shouts of praise and actions like raising one's hands or clapping for joy, these same actions can become prescribed, almost scripted, acts which draw attention to the individual. And those things, which at one point were authentic exclamations of praise and acts of worship, can eventually become empty words and self-aggrandizing shows. The object of worship can then become a particular limited method and a well-practiced performance rather than the God to whom all of it is to be directed.

Today's appointed Psalm, Psalm 145, is identified by its superscription as "Praise." In fact, it is the only Psalm to be identified as such. And beyond the superscription, the Psalmist further proclaims its emphasis by employing the word for "praise" again along with two synonyms in the first two verses and by ending the Psalm with a declaration of praise. While Psalm 145 is like the final five Psalms of the Psalter in that it begins and ends with praise, it is unique in that it does not use an imperative verb to exhort its reader, listener, or singer to praise. That is to say, Psalm 145 does not command or tell its reader to praise the Lord. Instead of being a call to praise, it is a proclamation of a present and future reality characterized by the praise of God. According to Psalm 145, the future will feature all people and all creation praising God, like it or not.

In this Psalm, the Psalmist is not interested in telling you that you should be praising, nor is he concerned about directing your style or preference or method of praise. Much to our chagrin, here the Psalmist doesn't seem to be concerned with the "how to's" of praise or whether we use an organ or a piano or even a (gasp) guitar in our music of praise. In fact, for him praise extends beyond music to the whole of a person's life. The Psalmist is interested in something more rudimentary, something more essential, something more basic than "how to's." In a Psalm we could simply title "Praise," the Psalmist attempts to convey the most elementary of concepts, yet one on which all our language and life depends. The Psalmist is concerned about the "who" of our praise. The Psalmist emphasizes the object of the praise that he, the saints, and all of creation proclaim now and will proclaim forever in word and deed. The ultimate object of all praise is the Lord God. According to Psalm 145, all things will find their end in the praise of God.

In a simple, yet creative, way, the Psalmist conveys this most basic theological point through how the Psalm is structured. A common method for structuring poetry, and especially the Psalms, is through the use of acrostics. And as it is with most structural strategies, acrostics get lost in translation. Consequently, it's easy for us English readers to miss the alphabetical acrostic of Psalm 145. Each new verse and one partial verse in the Psalm begins with the subsequent alphabetical character in Hebrew. Such a strategy makes for easy memorization and suggests that the poet, or Psalmist, is communicating something as fundamental as the building blocks of words. In essence, the structure is saying, "Here is the alphabet of praise. These are the ABC's of praise, and the message of this Psalm is a key building block of the language and life of praise."

If the acrostic structuring of the Psalm emphasizes the basic and essential nature of its message, the poet of this prayer presents his key point through further structural detail. Pay attention to the progression of the Psalm. Each declaration of praise is paired with a description of God's character or action. For example, the Psalm begins, "I will extol you my God and King and bless your name for ever and ever. Everyday I will bless you, and praise your name for ever and ever." This declaration of future praise is immediately followed by "Great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised; his greatness is unsearchable." And later in the Psalm, he continues with another example. "[The generations] shall celebrate the fame of your abundant goodness, and shall sing aloud of your righteousness. The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all he has made." Praise for the Psalmist is always oriented to its ultimate object. Praise does not rest in the one who is proclaiming, exalting, exclaiming, extoling, commending or blessing. Rather praise is contingent upon the character and activity of God. And for the psalmist, praise will happen now and forever because the God who deserves the praise is consistent in his work and character both now and forever.

The question for the Psalmist is not, "Will you or others praise God?" Nor is it, "How do you or others prefer praising God?" The question is, "What are the characteristics and works of the Lord God that you and others and all things will praise?" It's a given that either now or in the coming future all things will participate in the exaltation of the Lord. But the deeper question is, "Who is this God, and what about this God warrants proclamation and praise?"

Early in the Psalm, the Psalmist gives what might be expected examples of God's acts and characteristics that are worthy of praise. For instance, he proclaims God's unfathomable and unsearchable greatness and declares God's commendable and wondrous works and mighty and awesome acts—the likes of which produce the marvel and wonder of sweeping sands, cascading falls, and rolling plains. At certain points in the Psalm, the attributes and actions of God, which are worthy of praise, seem to exceed the limits of language. In these instances, the Psalmist stacks words of wonderment and awe on top of one another to convey those things about God that will draw all people into praise. Phrases such as the "glorious splendor of God's majesty" are tightly packed ways of expressing the magnificent qualities of God that are worthy of admiration, meditation, and proclamation. These qualities, characteristics, and works of God are just the kind of things we all would celebrate after being stirred by a splendid, coastal sunrise or moved by a magnificent, snow covered mountaintop. They are the very things that the breath-taking beauty of the natural world inspires deep within us. It's no wonder the Psalmist would include

these as things for which he and the saints praise the Lord. Praising God for the grandeurs of creation is to be expected. Yet, he doesn't stop with God's majestic and wonderful works revealed in nature.

Instead the Psalmist proclaims something more. What is unexpected about his proclamation is that as he moves to the heart of the Psalm and to its central focus, he exalts aspects of God's character and activity that are revealed through God's interaction and relationship with people. For example, he writes, "The generations shall celebrate the fame of your abundant goodness and sing aloud of your righteousness." This is another way of saying, "The generations will share the stories of how God's been good to them and of how God has rightly order relationships between God and God's people."

The exalting, proclaiming, and praising of all people and all things finds root in the fertile soil of God's relationship with God's people. Out of this relationship, all people grow in the knowledge and experience that "the Lord is faithful in all his words and gracious in all his deeds." On this point, the Psalmist does not leave us to wonder how the Lord has been faithful and gracious. Instead, he gives clear examples. The Psalmist speaks of God's grace and faithfulness by pointing to how God cares for the weak, the downtrodden, the hungry, the needy, and those humbled and brought low. "The Lord upholds all who are falling, and raises up all who are bowed down. The Lord gives food in due season to all who look to him, and opens his hand satisfying the desire of all living things." The Lord is worthy to be praised both for the grandeur of creation and for his faithful presence with the lowly. The Lord is the "who" that will receive the praise and exaltation of all creation. And the attributes and actions that make the Lord worthy of this praise are revealed in the marvels of creation and his presence with and care for the downtrodden.

The Psalmist clearly emphasizes the God who will receive his, the saints', and all creation's praises. The writer crafted and structured this Psalm that we readers wouldn't miss this central message: "All your works shall give thanks to you, O Lord, and all your faithful shall bless you. They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom, and tell of your power, to make known to all people your mighty deeds, and the glorious splendor of your kingdom. Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures throughout all generations." This Psalm exalts a King known for his graciousness, compassion, and steadfast love, and it proclaims a kingdom marked by the glory and splendor of its King. The Psalm proclaims a kingdom, a reality, a way of life characterized by praise that has already broken into the world and that in the end will be the reality for us all from everlasting to everlasting. The King and his kingdom are the heart of Psalm 145. The King and his kingdom are the heart of praise.

So where does this leave us? The Psalm is not commanding us to praise God, but we also don't seem to have much of a choice in the end either. Maybe this is the real gift of this Psalm. Maybe it's between being pressured into praising God in the present on one side and knowing that God's kingdom of praise is where we're all headed on the other, that we find the freedom for lives of authentic worship and praise. Maybe it's in recognizing what is to come, without being pressed into it immediately, that we find the space for focusing on the God toward whom all praise finally will be directed.

Somewhere in this space between our present disposition and the posture of praise into which we'll be formed, we're given the opportunity to read today's appointed Psalm. And in reading the Psalm, we get to hear of God's character and God's works that have inspired the exaltation, and meditation, and proclamation, and declaration, and celebration of God and God's kingdom among the Psalmist, the saints, and all creation. In reading the Psalm, we might even get a glimpse of God's glory revealed either in the magnificence of creation or in God's compassion, steadfast love and faithfulness toward those in need. And when we get a glimpse of God's glory, as one artist puts it, we might just be "changed by what [we've] be shown, more glory than the world has known, [and it] keeps [us] ramblin' on. [We'll be] skippin' like a calf loosed from its stall, free to love once and for all." And in the wonder of God's glory and our freedom, we might just realize that God's "is the kingdom, and we're the guest" and so we'll "put [our] voice[s] up to the test" and "sing 'Lord come soon' ah yes."¹ And maybe, just maybe, in the end, we'll find the nerve to raise our hands or even shout aloud, "Amen."

¹ Josh Garrels. "Farther Along." *Love & War & the Sea in between*.