

Let Everything That Breathes Praise the Lord!
Rev. Nicole Farley
First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
April 7, 2013

Revelation 1:4-8

⁴ John to the seven churches that are in Asia:

Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, ⁵and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, ⁶and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.

⁷ Look! He is coming with the clouds;

every eye will see him,
even those who pierced him;
and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail.

So it is to be. Amen.

⁸ 'I am the Alpha and the Omega', says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

Psalm 150

¹ Praise the Lord!

Praise God in his sanctuary;
praise him in his mighty firmament!

² Praise him for his mighty deeds;
praise him according to his surpassing greatness!

³ Praise him with trumpet sound;
praise him with lute and harp!

⁴ Praise him with tambourine and dance;
praise him with strings and pipe!

⁵ Praise him with clanging cymbals;
praise him with loud clashing cymbals!

⁶ Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!
Praise the Lord!

Yesterday I drove past a semi, a plain old semi with a white trailer and yellow cab, without any real markings on it...except, on the back door of the semi, in easily readable letters, "PRAISE BE TO GOD." As I passed the driver's door of the cab, in the same easily readable letters, "PRAISE BE TO GOD." And I wanted to know more. What made this driver say it? What made him choose to use his vehicle as, well, a vehicle for sharing his faith and so publicly offering his praise to God?

Our readings today both give praise to God, one by listing the reasons God is to be praised, him "who is and who was and who is to come," and the other doing the same and adding the instructions of how to praise God and where to praise God and who should praise God which, as it turns out, is everything that has breath.

Now I come from a family where praying in public was thought to be showing off so we certainly would not have been praising God in his mighty firmament, meaning everywhere, and I grew up another variety of “frozen chosen” so we wouldn’t have been praising God in his sanctuary either, unless it was with quiet and orderly prayer – definitely not with trumpets, lutes, tambourines, and – gasp – dancing. Definitely not with exclamation points. If there were something more understated than the period, that is what we would have chosen.

Don’t get me wrong – I can name hundreds of reasons why I personally think God is worthy of praise and even reasons why our denomination, and the larger whole of Christianity, thinks God is worthy of praise, and why other faith traditions think God is worthy of praise. Praise God for the ways in which God draws good out of bad. Praise God for the people I love, and especially for the people who love me. Praise God for creation, creation of crocuses and giant trees and quiet streams and magnificent waterfalls and fiery volcanos and snow-capped mountains and creation of my child and of all God’s children. Praise God for finding me when I was lost. Praise God for leading me to you, for the gift you have been to me. Praise God for the sacred gift of being part of your living and your dying. Praise God for Christ who guides me and who also forgives me when I don’t follow my guide and who prompts me to keep striving toward ways filled with love and compassion. Praise God for the gift of the Holy Spirit so that we might not feel alone. Praise God for the Church where we can be family, where we can be inspired, where we can be supported, where we can be company for one another in the darkness.

These are but a few of the reasons I can think of to praise God. As John writes from his prison cell on the island of Patmos, to Christ “be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.” To God be the glory. All glory, laud, and honor. Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen. Amen.

But harps and strings and cymbals? Umm. If you’ve ever been to a flea market or antique fair, you may have picked up that the most respectful way to haggle when you don’t want to pay what the seller is asking is to say, “What are you willing to accept?” or even “Would you be willing to go lower?” So, God, what are you willing to accept? Would you be willing to take a thoughtfully worded prayer? How about a heartfelt affirmation of your greatness with a fellow believer?

Now, I know for certain that some of you are comfortable with more expressive forms of praise. You light our ways. For those of us who are still haggling with God, who, frankly, enjoy being “frozen chosen,” well, falling back on “that’s how I was raised” will only get you so far, will only give glory to God so far. What holds us back from full praise, whatever you think that looks like? I cannot speak for you but I can speak for myself: fear. Fear of angering people, though the older I get, the less I worry

about that. Fear of being thought of as weird. Both of those come from being worried about what people think of me. And then there's the biggest one: fear of being asked to defend myself. Part of me wants to avoid the potential conflict; part of me is worried I can't defend myself. Me, your seminary-trained pastor, is worried about presenting a viable argument for why I think God is worthy of praise. Mind you, I'm not talking about a discussion with fellow believers - there are fewer of us nowadays in North America - I'm talking about the growing majority of non-believers or even the folks that call themselves "spiritual but not religious." What would I say to them?

One of my former youth group kids, who was always a self-proclaimed non-believer who came to youth group for the fellowship, recently blogged not on his own beliefs per se but on my beliefs, your beliefs, the beliefs of Christians. I'll save you the gory details but offer you this quote: "Reading the Bible is an exercise in suppressing both laughter and outrage - that billions of people can believe something so foolish!...A little reading can go a long way, and I encourage everyone this Easter to sit down and read the four gospel accounts of the resurrection of Jesus - everyone needs a good laugh." For the first time, I felt outrage - it's one thing to claim his doubt for himself but to insult my belief as foolishness, well, I was offended to say the least. And I wish I could say I was offended on God's behalf as well.

But what could I say? What should I say? What did the early Christians say to the Romans? What did the Hebrews say to the Egyptians / Assyrians / Babylonians? In Rabbi David Wolpe's book *Why Faith Matters*, he speaks to the needs of those like my young friend who expect to take the whole of the Bible, flood tory and all, as literal, saying, "A deeper view of guiding religious stories is that even when they are not factual, they are true. The deep stories of tradition capture essential truths that are more profound than literal accuracy."¹ To those who argue science has disproved religion, he writes, "As we know more about the world, that knowledge informs our response to the miracle of what exists...Science and spirit are not opposed. They join hands in our lives..."² These replies may help you field arguments against literalism in the Bible or the superiority of science but what of those hostile toward God? What can we do when someone is hostile toward belief, someone who certainly, though having breath, believes they would never praise the Lord?

The simple fact, as with my friend, is that I can never presume to change his faith or give him mine. That is an act of God through the Holy Spirit. What *we* can do in the face of opposition, like the early Christians and the Hebrew people, is not let others keep us from praising God. Praising God in its

¹ David J. Wolpe, *Why Faith Matters* (New York: Harper One, 2008), pp. 144-5.

² David J. Wolpe, *Why Faith Matters* (New York: Harper One, 2008), pp. 88-89.

best form is never about us, about what people may think of us, even about what people may do to us; praising God is about God. And not just utterances of praise here and there but a life of praise.

Which brings us back to the natural fear of not knowing how we might defend ourselves. The truest issue is not how we might defend ourselves but how we might defend God, how we might speak up for God. This is indeed sticky for I cannot say what the God my friend does not believe in looks like or what that God does or does not do. I *mostly* think I understand what God is capable of but I cannot say what God will do or why, and even what I think I understand is limited by my being the created, not the creator. And these seem to be the answers others want; sometimes they are the answers we want. I don't have those answers. What I have is faith, faith in God's goodness, faith in God's love, faith in God's forgiveness. What I aspire to is faith like the psalmist who, in the face of calamity, first praised God's goodness before offering lament to the God he trusted was with him in his calamity.

To some the faith I have, and the faith I seek, makes me look like a fool. To some playing instruments and dancing for God looks foolish. To some speaking about God in the line at the grocery store seems foolish. To some praising God on a semi looks foolish.³ But praising God is not about how I look. What did the early Christians say to the Romans? What did the Hebrews say to the Egyptians / Assyrians / Babylonians? With much more at stake than their reputations, they said grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come. Praise the Lord! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty firmament! Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his surpassing greatness! Because we are gathered here, we *are* fools for Christ. Take your foolishness out from this place. I say to you again, praise God in his mighty firmament!

Let us pray: You who are and who was and who is to come, save us from our fears of foolishness, overwhelming us with the need to praise you above all else, we pray. Amen.

³ After worship on April 7, I was driving past Swirly's Custard on 76th and their sign read, "Praise the Lord." Make of that what you will!