

"Necessary Praise"

Psalm 22:1-11

Luke 19:36-40

Sermon Preached at Foundry United Methodist Church
on Sunday, September 22, 2002
by Rev. Dean Snyder

Let us pray: Open our eyes Jesus so that we might see you, Open our hearts so that we might feel you and open our lips so that we might praise you. Amen

I was riding my bicycle early one morning this week along the Mall when I passed a woman walking on the sidewalk whom I at first thought was talking to herself, but as I passed by I heard what she was saying and I realized that she was praying out loud. As she was walking briskly and swinging her arms, she was praying "You, God, are my stronghold. I need not fear, I need not win the battle, I need not get revenge ... because you, Oh God, are my stronghold and my strength."

I rode past her, and her words touched me, so I cycled around the block and came back and rode my bicycle slowly behind her and listened to her some more. As she walked swinging her arms, she said, "You, Oh God, are my Jehovah Jiro! You make a way when there is no way. You make the mountain road smooth so that I can climb even when the mountain is high. You, Oh God, are my Jehovah Jiro!"

Then she prayed, "You, God, are my great physician. I can keep my body strong and healthy and clean because, Oh God, you are my great physician."

I rode behind her and listened some more as she prayed -- and then I realized I was late for a meeting so I pulled away. As I did, I realized that I was envious of her ability to pray that way. I'm not sure that I have the faith that would allow me to march down the Mall at six a.m., on a Wednesday morning, praising God for the whole world to hear. As I peddled away, it did occur to me that I wanted to pray too, and I said this prayer. I said, "Yo, God, everything that she said goes for me too!"

Now, the interesting thing about her prayer was that she never once asked God to do anything. Her prayer was entirely a prayer of praise, telling God how great God is, and how wonderful God is and what God has done -- and therefore what she expects God to do -- and then she reminded herself as she praised God that because God was her strength and her stronghold, she didn't need to fight her own battles, she didn't need revenge. And because God was her great physician, she could keep her body strong and clean. Part of the process of her prayer was one of self suggestion -- by rehearsing in her mind who she believed God was and what God was doing and what God could do, she reminded herself about how she could trust God - and how she could live her life grateful to God because of what God was already doing.

I realize that one of the purposes of praising God is to remind ourselves what we believe so that we can live as people who trust God - but I know that she didn't believe that she was just suggesting things to herself. She really believed that she was talking to God.

How do our prayers and praise and worship affect God? When we worship and when we sing God's praise and proclaim God's praise, does God care? Are we engaged in something just to make ourselves feel better, or does it have some significance to God?

I was drawn this week to a strange verse from the book of Psalms. It is a much debated verse among Bible translators. If you read six different translations of the Bible, you will discover it translated in different ways, and the reason for this is that there are some folk who believe that what this verse actually says in the Hebrew is theologically impossible. Translation of the Bible, you know, is not an exact science. Translators not only read the words and translate them, they try to figure out what the writer actually meant to say. Translators debate this particular verse. What the Hebrew actually says is theologically unacceptable to many people.

Psalm 22:3 says, "You God are Holy, enthroned in the praises of Israel." "Enthroned in the praises of Israel." What the Psalm says is that human praise - the praises of Israel - the praises of God's people - actually places God on the throne; that it is the praise of God's people that gives God authority and sovereignty and power; that when we praise God we actually empower and enable and energize God to be God.

For much of the theological world, this would be unacceptable theology. Theological thinking that begins with reason would not understand the psalmist here at all - because Aquinas, and John Calvin and the great rationalist theologians begin with the question, who is God? Then they conclude that God must be the one who is perfect. If God is perfect, then God is all sufficient - God is the source of all things - God is the unmoved mover - therefore God needs nothing from humanity. God could not be perfect if God needed anything from us - and, therefore, what we as human beings do in the way of prayer, praise and worship cannot really affect God.

But the Bible doesn't begin to talk about God from the perspective of reason. The Bible begins with experience - how do we experience God? - and then attempts to use reason to figure out how to make sense of what our experience of God is. In the Biblical experience of God, God is not distant and remote and self-sufficient and unaffected by us. In the Biblical vision of God, God is in a relationship with us - God has become vulnerable to us. Therefore, what we think and feel and do, can influence and affect God. From the Biblical perspective, God's heart is pained by our grief - God hurts as a result of our pain - God heard the cries of the slaves in Egypt and decided to act - God's heart was moved by the injustice of their pain.

In scripture, God becomes irritated by our behavior. The way we behave can make God mad. In scripture, God is buoyed up, empowered, elevated -- God feels better -- as a result of our praise. Our praise makes God feel better - energizes God and empowers God to be God!

This is what I think. I think being God isn't easy. I think being God is a tough job description. I think that it once may have been that God was self-efficient and unaffected by us until God began the evolutionary process that resulted in you and me. I think once we were around being God became really hard work. I think God chose to be in relationship to us and therefore vulnerable to us and no longer self-sufficient and alone but affected in God's heart by what we do and what we fail to do and by the way we treat God and by the way we treat one another - so that God is affected by our praise or by our lack of praise - what we say and what we do and the way we think and the way we feel. It's not easy being God anymore. Some of us think it is because we'd like the job, but if we had it, I think we'd discover differently.

I went to seminary during the time of the Death of God movement. I read the Death of God theologians - some of you are old enough to remember the Death of God Movement when *Time* magazine had a cover story that said "Is God Dead?" and some theologians were saying that God had died in our lifetime. I read what they wrote very carefully and thoughtfully.

The conclusion that I came to later was that they were not all wrong - not that God had died, but I came to the conclusion that God was tired - that God had lived through two World Wars and a Holocaust. God had lived through the experience in our life time of coming to the brink of nuclear devastation - that at the same time that we place these enormous demands on the grace of God to somehow deal with our human madness the worship in our churches was pathetically dull!

In the 1950's and 1960's we were singing the same hymns we'd sung for a hundred years, there was no new music and we sang the hymns very badly - every organist before Eileen was trained to play so that no one would ever feel anything while they were singing. So, we went through a period where worship in churches was dull - the sermons were dull - no one was every allowed to laugh in church or to clap their hands or to do anything interesting - you came to church in that era for an hour and you were as boring as you could manage to be. At the same time that we were depleting all of the energy out of God to try to deal with our crazy wars and madness, we were giving God nothing back and I think that God got tired.

Then, something broke and we had a liturgical renewal within the church - we had new forms of worship emerge and we had great creative bursts of new anthems and of new music and we had the charismatic renewal in which people came to church and sang freely and worship became much energetic and much more interesting. I think that God must have enjoyed it much more. When we learned how to praise God better and to energize God, the result was that God was energized and the Berlin Wall came down.

That's my exegesis on what happened in my lifetime as a result of God's people learning again how to freely and energetically praise God and to lubricate the grace of God so that God might do the things God likes to do, like end war and cure disease - end injustices and reconcile people who have hated each other.

I think that when we praise God - when this choir sings the way they can sing, and the soprano's go high and loud and long, and the altos swell, and the tenors soar and the basses hold their of base line that provides a solid sound underneath, and our hearts skip a beat - I think that God's heart skips a beat at the same time and the next week God does something to make this world a better place because this choir has empowered and energized God. The grace of God is let loose upon the face of the earth when this choir sings. I think that as important as the social justice work is that we do all week long, this choir's praise of God, is just as important too. Wars end because we work for peace and because this choir sings God's praise.

I surely cannot sing like the choir, although I join in the hymns enthusiastically. (Jane always reminds me that before I sing, I must make sure my wireless mike is off.) I give it my best, but when I want to praise God, I can always come here and I listen to this choir and then I quietly say, "Yo God, everything they sang goes for me too."

I have one more thing I want to share. If you read the 22nd chapter of the book of Psalms - the one where it talks about how the praise of God puts God on a throne, enthrones God, energizes God, empowers God - makes God, God - makes God be able to stand being God - our praise does that. If you read that Psalm, you'll see that it is one of the most despondent Psalms in all of scripture. It begins with the verse "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" The Psalmist is in deep despair and sadness, and shares that sadness with God and then says, "Oh, but God you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel" - and begins to praise God for a while. After that, the Psalmist becomes despairing again and says, "I am a worm, I am worthless." The Psalmist prays out of his despair for a time and then, again, he begins to praise God and tell God how wonderful God is and all the great things that God has done to save Israel - then the Psalmist goes into despair again.

We don't praise God because we feel good - or because we feel like praising God - matter of fact, the time when it is most important to praise God is when we're feeling our lowest and when we're feeling our worst.

Because these times are a reminder that God's heart can break too - that we break God's heart again and again - that God becomes disappointed in us.

When our hearts are breaking it's a time when we are reminded how often we break God's heart - and this is the very time that we need to praise God.

You, O God, are holy. You've saved me before. I trust in you, Oh God, to save me again. And when we can't get our mouth to speak those kind of words, then we need to plop ourselves down in a pew and listen to this choir praise God and say, "Everything they sing, Oh God, me too."