

Jeremiah 20:7-13

“Praise the Lord???”

6/25/17 - Third Sunday after Pentecost

LCVH

Grace, mercy, and peace to from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ,

Amen.

“Praise to the Lord, the Almighty the King of Creation! O my soul, praise him, for He is your health and salvation! Let all who hear Now to his temple draw near, Joining in glad adoration!” This hymn we just sung is one of my favorite hymns. I get goosebumps whenever we sing it in church. The more I sing it and contemplate its lyrics, the more I appreciate it. The hymn takes a wide angle view of the amazing works God has done, and, seeing these mighty works, it erupts into praise for God.

“Praise to the Lord.” We honestly have many reasons to praise the Lord. We may praise God for blessing us with things like family, friends, our education, a steady job, our health, a home, and our possessions. There are also joyous occasions that we can celebrate by praising God. Occasions like the birth of a baby, graduations, successful surgery, or anniversaries. There are also moments where we may experience creation in such a way that leads us to praise God. This happens to me when I witness a beautiful sunset, go on a hike in the mountains, or gaze at the stars on a clear night. Of course, there are also spiritual reasons for praising God. He forgives all our sins, saves us from hell, and promises us eternal life. So as Christians we have many reasons to praise God. Any of the things I’ve mentioned and more can fill our hearts with an overflow of praise to God, the One who has blessed us with such gifts.

But what is it that drives us to praise God? Why do we feel compelled to praise the Lord? Is praising God *only* thanking him for receiving or experiencing good gifts? Is praising God *merely* an emotional response to something we enjoy? There are plenty of people who don’t

believe in God but receive and experience the same things we do, yet as Christians we respond in a different way. While others may praise their own efforts, luck, fate, Allah, or some other false god, we direct our praises towards the Triune God. But what makes our praise different? What is it that distinguishes us from the rest of the world in how or what or when we praise?

On the surface the answer to these questions may be obvious. We praise God simply because we know that all that we have is a gift from God, so we thank him for physical possessions, joyous occasions, the wonders of creation, and spiritual gifts. But is this the only reason for praising God? I'm asking these questions about how or why we praise God because of a story I recently read about a preacher, a preacher who, like us, praised God. But this preacher's praise didn't derive so much from the gifts God had given him. He often praised God in odd ways and at strange times in his life, and it's the context of this preacher's strange life that makes me wonder why Christians praise God.

This preacher was called to proclaim God's Word to his home town, to his own people. The trouble was that his fellow countrymen didn't want to hear what he had to say. He preached against their sins and how they had turned their backs against God. He especially preached against the political and religious leaders and accused them of taking advantage of the people and leading them away from God. Naturally, the leaders didn't like what they heard, so they persecuted him. They arrested him, beat him, locked him into stocks overnight, and even threw him into a well. People responded to his message by either ignoring him or persecuting, so his ministry appeared to be unsuccessful. On top of all of this, the preacher suffered from deep bouts of depression. He felt isolated from his own people and abandoned by God. At one point he couldn't take it any longer and decided not to preach God's Word anymore, but he found that he couldn't do this. It was impossible for him to keep God's Word hushed up inside of himself. So

he continued to preach against the peoples' sins even though it brought suffering upon himself, even though most didn't listen to him, even though the leaders continued to persecute him, even though it made him depressed and lonely.

Needless to say, this preacher had a difficult life and a disheartening ministry. He often lashed out against God for all the afflictions he experienced. God had gotten him into all these troubles, so he felt this "cause" against God because it was his Word that compelled him to preach which subsequently resulted in his persecution. Yet it was precisely in the middle of these persecutions, of his painful afflictions, in his isolating depression, that the preacher spoke some of his boldest words. It was in his darkest moments this preacher proclaimed words like these: "Sing to the LORD; praise the LORD! For he has delivered the life of the needy from the hand of evildoers."

If you take a look in your worship folder, you'll notice that these words of praise come from verse thirteen of today's Old Testament reading found in Jeremiah 20. The prophet Jeremiah was this strange preacher I've been telling you about. I wanted to provide a short summary of his life because I wanted to highlight how absurd his words of praise seem given their context. Even our reading from chapter 20, especially verse thirteen, seems out of place. The verses leading up to our selected reading recount a time when a temple priest disliked Jeremiah's preaching so much that he had him beaten and thrown into stocks overnight. And immediately after verse thirteen, where Jeremiah proclaims "Sing to the Lord; praise the Lord!", he *curses* the day he was born. What are these verses doing next to each other? Jeremiah's emotions are all over the place like a roller coaster. Why in the world would Jeremiah sandwich words of praise between being physically tortured wishing he'd never been born? This leads me back to my earlier question: what drives Christians to praise God? It can't only be for good

things, for Jeremiah's life was honestly full of awful things. He had to preach against his own people and was persecuted for it, he eventually witnessed the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, and he spent the rest of his life as an exile in Egypt. And Jeremiah *never* glossed over his suffering. His writings are full of his raw emotions. Yet, in spite of all of this, Jeremiah still had moments where he was able to praise God.

So what about us? Thankfully we aren't being persecuted, beaten, arrested, and thrown down wells for the sake of the gospel, but, like Jeremiah, most of us have probably felt emotions that were just as raw and painful. Like Jeremiah, we can feel isolated from God when we experience a sickness that's destroying our body, when a loved one betrays and deserts us, or when a financial crisis strikes our family. We can theologically know that God is with us, but experientially he seems to have forgotten about us and ditched us. However, looking back to these dark times, despite how awful you may have felt, did you ever find yourself still praying to God even though it seemed like he wasn't listening? Did you still plead with God even though it felt like he didn't care? And did you experience small moments where you found yourself uttering words of praise to God even though you were cursing him just a few breaths earlier?

I've mentioned earlier that "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty" is one of my favorite hymns. Ironically, this became one of my favorites not because of anything good that happened but because of one of the darkest periods in my life. I'll spare you the details, but my first year at the seminary was an extremely difficult time in my life. I was overwhelmed with depression, anxiety, and doubt. I had experienced betrayal and trust had been broken. And I was angry. Angry at people, but mostly angry at God. It felt like God didn't care about my hurt, like he had abandoned me. Even though I prayed to him, I didn't really believe that he was listening. The God of love and grace that I was learning about in my classes didn't seem to line up with the

“God” I was experiencing. And this only made me angrier, more depressed, and more anxious. I was flooded with all these raw emotions that affected me physically and spiritually. Anyway, I had a conversation with a professor about all of this, and he suggested that I look for hymns to read or sing during those dark times. And so this hymn became the one that I would start singing to myself when my thoughts and emotions would overwhelm me. So, even though I felt awful, even though I felt isolated from God, even though I was angry at God and *didn't* want to praise him, in those dark moments when words would fail me and emotions would overtake me, all I could do was start humming or singing “Praise to the Lord, the Almighty the King of Creation.” Singing this hymn would direct me back to God precisely when I didn't want anything to do with God.

What led me to do this? What led Jeremiah to praise God in the middle of his afflictions? What enables you to praise him in the midst of suffering? For there certainly isn't anything within us that's able to praise God, especially during moments of suffering. It's *faith*. It's faith that enables us to praise. It's faith that *stubbornly* holds onto Christ and the cross even when everything is falling apart. It's faith that intentionally trusts God and his promises even though it seems like he doesn't care. And we can trust God because he sent Jesus to live and die and rise for us. As a human Jesus experienced much of the same grief and suffering that we experience. He knows the sufferings you endure and how difficult it can be to trust him in those dark moments. But the Holy Spirit has given you the gift of faith, and it's by faith that he guides you to trust in Christ. And *faith* is what drives Christians to praise God. It's what sets apart from the rest of the world, because faith trusts God's promises that he's always with you, that he deeply loves and cares for you, that he forgives you, and that he'll give you eternal life free from all suffering. This faith stubbornly clings to God's promises despite all that's going on around you.

This faith turns to God when it seems like God has turned away from you. This faith equips you to dig your heels into God's truth even when your own emotions and mind are telling you to give up on God.

So when we praise the Lord, it's actually a statement of faith, a confession, if you will, of what we believe and who we believe in. Faith empowers us to praise God in both good and bad times. This is what Jeremiah did. He looked back at Israel's history and his own life and, through the eyes of faith, he saw how God had provided for and delivered his people. The God who cared for and saved his people, including Jeremiah, was worthy of praise regardless of whatever was going on. The same is true for us. Through faith, when we praise God, we're confessing that we believe in the God who has saved us. We're making the bold statement that whatever happens to us, we stubbornly believe in Jesus Christ and hold onto all that he's done for us through his life, death, and resurrection. We don't praise God *solely* for the good blessings he has given us. Rather, we praise God because of who he is and for all that he has done for us through Jesus Christ. So in closing, I would like for us as a congregation to praise God, regardless of anything that's going on in our lives right now, with a bold statement of faith by singing again verses 1 and 5 of "Praise to the Lord, the Almighty."

"Let the Amen Sound from His people again; Gladly forever adore Him!" Amen.