

“Let everything that has breathe
praise the Lord!”
AMEN!

Each Sunday, you might notice,
we open the sermon with a short prayer.

I used to not do this.

For in the first few years of being a pastor
my mindset was on the truth that
the sermon IS a prayer,
so why pray before the prayer?! :-)

And while I still believe that to be true,
for the last few years, I have been adding
a short prayer to help set the tone for
the message from the pulpit.

To allow space for people to settle into
the spoken word and a practice
to ground myself.

And I almost always take a line or two
from the assigned Psalm for the day to do
these important things. (Pause)

Today’s Psalm 150, is the very

last one in the Book of Psalms.

First and lasts, always get our attention and
this concluding song of praise is no different.

We are told how praise to God resonates
from the sanctuary and then out to the world.

Praises with instrument and dance that calls
for letting “everything with breath praise the Lord.”

This is why we are here.

To give praise to God.

To be reminded of our humanity and of
God’s presence here and out there,
but first and foremost,
we are here to praise the Lord! (Pause)

In verses 3-5, we are given
methods for how to praise.

Music and dancing were essential parts of
worship in the ancient Near East.

“Miriam danced after the Israelites
crossed the Red Sea safely.

With tambourine in hand,
all the women followed and danced.”

In other places of the Old Testament,
“David danced around the ark of the covenant
with all his might!”

He later appointed musicians in the house of
the Lord with cymbals, harps, and lyres.

Psalm 150 brings the realization of
music and dancing to be
used in worship to praise God!

A full symphony with many hands and
many voices singing to give praise to God. (Pause)

It is one of the many things I love
about this congregation.

Her willingness to try new things in worship
to praise God and to find God active here.

The slow and steady work of building relationships
and spending time together is beginning
once again after the time of separation.

In some ways, the past two years have been
a snapshot of the entire Book of Psalms.

When the pandemic began we faithfully meditated
on what this would mean for the way
we “Do” church.

We searched for wisdom to guide us
along the way and we required many
hands and talents.

The traditions of St. Stephen were disrupted.

Important things like the Service of Reconciliation,
talent shows, camping trips,
choir, OWL lunches, Sunday school,
large group worship and others...
were put on hold.

Yet, God provided because God’s Spirit,
working in you all,
was NOT put on hold.

In the two years, it was like
we experienced
the entire Book of Psalms.

Like in Psalm 1 and 2 we heard God’s wisdom
and acknowledged God’s role in providing for us.

And as the Psalms progress we chronicled

joy and sorrow,
hope and skepticism,
gratitude and anger.

And we found (or find) that the Psalms
gave us permission to direct them all to
or about the God we praise and worship.

Each word and phrase in the Psalms
patch together a quilt work of emotion
and experience that make up our lives.

The Old Testament Professor at
McAfee School of Theology,
Nancy deClaisse-Walford, wrote

how “We find awe and wonder in Psalm 8:
When I look at your heavens,
the works of your fingers...
[we ask] what are human beings that you
are mindful of them?”

Words of utter despair in Psalm 22:
My God, my God, why have you forsaken me...

I am a worm, and not human;
scorned by others, and
despised by the people.

Words of longing for God in Psalm 42:
As a deer pants for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.

Words that accuse God in Psalm 74:
O God, why do you cast us off forever?

Why does your anger smoke against
the sheep of your pasture?

The words of confident trust in Psalm 97:
Light dawns for the righteous and joy
for the upright in heart.

The multitudes of human emotions
expressed in the Psalms reflect
the ebb and flow of human life.”

I didn't really intend for this morning's message
to be so centered on the Psalms but our
daily walks (especially in the last two years)
have been in despair and hope,
from questioning to assurance,
from amazement to doubt.

Each emotion, each reality,
mirrored in the honesty of the psalter.

The Psalms are messy because life is messy.

And then with Psalm 150, one of the readings
assigned for today, we hear the
call to praise the Lord!

To offer a “Hallelujah Chorus” in the place
where we stand, be it in church or at home,
in nature or the city, walking a trail or
driving a car.

Sing praises, dance, make joyful noises...
Praise the Lord! (Pause)

It was all Thomas wanted to do, really.

To praise the Lord.

Thomas wanted what everyone else had had.

The chance to see Jesus and it hurt him
to hear that others had the experience.

It wasn't doubt.

There was unbelief in him about
the amazing story of resurrection that
they told, but who doesn't have unbelief
from time to time?

“Lord, I believe! Help me in my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24)

We notice that deeper than unbelief,
Thomas wanted to have the intimate
experience with the Lord and so
he asked for what he needed...

To see and touch Jesus for himself. (Pause)

It is mindful teaching for us to know
that the people we come into contact with
either in church or outside of it
may be hurting like Thomas was hurting.

Maybe this is you or person right next to you.

Deeply needing a chance to see and touch Jesus.

Screaming for an intimate experience with Christ. (Pause)

The good news today is that Christ will enter
into the small room that we hide ourselves in.

Locked doors and fear will not keep God out.

And this is good reason to praise the Lord!

For Christ will present God's Self to us.

That is the message of the Word made flesh.

That is the message of John's Gospel,
written so that
 "you may come to believe (or trust)
 that Jesus is the Son of God."

It cannot be fully proven but God can be fully present.

The Word became flesh...
flesh and Word,
 fully scarred and fully present...
 leading to Thomas' confession:

My Lord and my God!

Alleluia! Christ is risen.
 (Christ is risen, indeed! Alleluia!)

Christ is present in you.

Let us go out and share this message of peace.

AMEN!