

Bellaire Community United Methodist Church

March 5, 2017

## **“Last Supper Songs”**

*Series of Psalms (Lent) – part 1*

Psalms 113 & 114

This past week marked the beginning of Lent, a season of preparation for Easter. Similar to the way that Advent leads to Christmas, Lent is a time when we examine ourselves ahead of another high holiday in the Christian year. We started with a service of confession and forgiveness on Ash Wednesday, and some of us received the ashes as a mark of humility before God. It was a time to remember our sins, remember our mortality, and more importantly, remember the mercy of our great God.

Of course, Ash Wednesday is not the only day to spend time in self-inspection. The entire season of Lent is meant to help us prepare to receive Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior and remember his sacrifice on the cross. So to prepare our hearts over the next seven weeks, we are going to use the book of psalms to guide us and connect us to the Easter story.

The Psalms are literally the center of our Protestant bibles. They represent one hundred fifty passionate poems to God. These are songs of great depth and joy. As we study them, we will see that the words of the psalms span a full range of emotions concerning faith and life.

The book of Psalms is rightly called the prayer book of the bible. Written and compiled over several hundred years, these prayers and songs came into final form around the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. - several hundred years before Christ. Do you see the red hymnals in your pews this morning? Well, the book of Psalms is the literal hymnbook for the Jewish people, and by extension, us Christians, too. And

it is important for us to realize that these were written before Jesus' time on earth. Growing up in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine, Jesus knew these same psalms, read them, memorized them, sang them, and most importantly, Jesus prayed them.

Just as there are many different emotions we feel, there are many different types of psalms. The most common psalms are laments – cries of woe and distress. The second most common psalms are hymns of praise, which we will discuss today. Other psalms are expressions of confidence in God, prayers for the king, psalms about studying God's law, prayers for help, and a few other types as well. Different scholars apply these labels, even though the psalms themselves do not. The categories are not critical – I simply want you to know that there is a psalm for every possible circumstance in your life, from your greatest joy to your deepest sorrow.

Today we encounter psalms of praise, or hymns. Specifically, we read Psalms 113 and 114, which are part of a collection known as the Egyptian Hallel, which span Psalms 113 to 118. The word "Hallel" means "praise" in Hebrew. Now, these psalms are not Egyptian praises, nor were they written in Egypt. Rather, they all concern Israel's history in Egypt. These psalms were sung at important Jewish festivals, not the least of which was Passover.

The gospels tell us that Jesus celebrated the Passover with his disciples the night before he died. Passover, if you didn't know, was the highest holiday of the year for the Jews. It was their "Independence Day" – the anniversary of Moses leading them out of slavery in Egypt across the Red Sea. In the midst of this important festival, Jesus told his disciples that one of them would betray him. And he washed their feet. And he instituted what we now call the "Last Supper." And in the middle of this whirlwind, we find this simple verse:

“When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.”

(Matt. 26:30 and Mark 14:26.)

Have you ever thought about what song you would sing on the night before you knew you were going to die? Well, these are the songs which Jesus did sing, and sang every year at the Passover festival. If they meant something to him, surely they will mean something to us. So let's take a look at each.

Psalms 113 starts with a command: Praise the Lord. Literally, Hallelu Yah. Hallelujah. I imagine to the 1<sup>st</sup> century Jews, it would invoke a similar feeling as when we sing, “Praise God, from whom all blessings flow.” The psalm immediately puts us in our proper place before God. We are “servants” of the Lord. (verse 113:2).

This psalm also tells us when to praise God – “from the rising of the sun to the place where it sets.” In other words, every waking moment of your life. Did the sun rise this morning? Even if it was cloudy? Yes? Then, according to this psalm, you should be praising God. But wait, what if it's after sunset? Guess what? Passover started after sundown. So Jesus and his disciples were praising God after dark as well.

What I love about the next part of this song is it answers why we should praise God. There is no one like God. God is above all. God literally bends down to look at the stars, which of course we have to look up to see. Have you ever craned your neck at night to stare up? Imagine God, leaning down on hands and knees, like we would to examine bugs on the sidewalk. That's how God sees the stars. So we praise God because of God's supreme place over all creation.

But it gets even better. The psalmist tells us to not only praise God for who God is, but also for what God does. God raises the poor and needy from the dust.

(verse 7) Think about dirt – it signifies poverty, disrespect, uncleanness. And yet God takes the people in the worst of positions and puts them in the best of positions – at the table with royalty. (verse 8) God brings children to women who are barren. (verse 9). In other words, God shatters boundaries and prejudices, and God makes all people equal. This is what God does, and that is why we praise Him.

So far, this first psalm of praise is rather general. There are no specific memories or stories evoked by this psalm. It's an appetizer, if you will, for what comes next, the main course. Psalm 114 now evokes a very specific memory for Israel.

Let's read the first four verses again. (Psalm 114:1-4)

When Israel came out of Egypt,  
Jacob from a people of foreign tongue,  
<sup>2</sup>Judah became God's sanctuary,  
Israel his dominion.  
<sup>3</sup>The sea looked and fled,  
the Jordan turned back;  
<sup>4</sup>the mountains leaped like rams,  
the hills like lambs.

Have you seen "The Prince of Egypt"? Then you know the scene that this psalm is describing. Two scenes, actually. The first is the Exodus. Israel left the foreign country of Egypt, and God parted the Red Sea. The Great Sea "fled" before the glory of God. Similarly, when Joshua came to the Jordan River at the very end of Israel's wanderings, the river parted and let the Israelites cross. So this psalm reminds the Hebrews of their salvation through great waters, which fled in the presence of the Lord.

There is one other point to this short psalm that I want to share, something I learned last year in seminary. The sea is often a metaphor for powers that oppose God, or are under the control of God. Sometimes the sea represents forces, nations who are opposed to Israel. So not only do these verses remind Israel of a specific moment of salvation – the crossing of the Red Sea – they also remind them that all forces of nature and evil who are opposed to God must flee before God’s presence. That is indeed a great reason to fear God and praise Him.

The remaining verses describe mountains trembling before God, much in the manner of a powerful earthquake. God is also described as having the power to turn rock into water, such as God did for Moses. (See Exodus 17:6 and Numbers 20:11)

What is really going on here? Why would Jesus, his disciples, and the rest of the Israelites for centuries sing these psalms at dinner? For one simple reason: to remind each other how good God is.

When I think about it, I sing the same prayers with my family at the dinner table. It’s OK that we repeat them over and over, because they are true.

“O, the Lord is good to me,  
And so I thank the Lord,  
For giving me the things I need,  
the sun and the rain and the apple seed.

O, the Lord is good to me. Amen.” (Johnny Appleseed grace)

So, really, doesn’t it make sense that Jesus would be reminding himself of all that God the Father had done for Israel, when Jesus was about to face the greatest challenge of his life?

The point of these psalms, and all the psalms which we categorize as “hymns” or “psalms of praise” or “Hallels,” is that we need to remind ourselves of the goodness of God because we believe these stories reveal God’s character, and God will continue to act in a way that saves God’s people. When you are faced with a difficult moment in life, the best thing you can do is praise God, and remind yourself, God has been with me before. God will be with me now and always.

Do you praise God at all times? Is God’s praise always on your lips? (Psalm 34:1) If you are going to say yes to those questions, then you need to answer this question: Why do you praise God?

It’s not a matter of praising God when everything is going great. It’s not a matter of praising God only when you are in church, and someone is playing the piano, organ, or guitar. My favorite story of praise in the Bible is in Acts 16, when Paul and Silas were in prison, after being beat up and arrested. Acts 16:25 says, “About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them.” At midnight? About the same time as Jesus and his disciples sang their hymns and left for the Garden of Gethsemane? It can be no coincidence. Paul and Silas might have been singing these very same psalms, the ones that Jesus himself sang.

This is what praising God does for us. It makes us focus on what God has done, and it puts us in our proper place before God. Praising gets us in the right perspective. My brother Todd used to wear a shirt that said, “God first. Others second. I’m third.” Exactly. You can’t praise God when you are sitting on the throne of your life. You can’t praise Jesus if He’s not number one.

Praise is a choice, not a feeling. I don’t think Jesus felt much like singing that night long ago, but he did. I don’t think Paul and Silas “felt like” praising God,

but they did. In the Israelite tradition, these psalms were the equivalent of “Amazing Grace” and “Old Rugged Cross”. The Jews remembered that God saved them in the past, and they expected God to deliver them again. The psalms tells us who God is and why we praise him. They help us put God in the right place – above all else.

So as you go out the doors today, I want you to remember one thing: when you need words to praise God, look to the psalms. Memorize them, sing them, meditate on them. Even if you don’t remember the literal words, remember the feelings they invoke. Look at the thoughts. Why were they praising God? What had God done for them?

Then apply those thoughts to your life. What has God done for you? Are you breathing? Praise the Lord! Are you saved? Praise the Lord! Do you have hope? Praise the Lord! Has God given you a community, a tradition, a history, to join and add your voice? Then you have a psalm of praise to sing. So sing it loud.

### Memory verse

“I will praise the LORD at all times; His praise will always be on my lips.”

Psalm 34:1 (HCSB)

### Reflection questions

1. Where and when do you find it easiest to praise God? Do you use music or scripture meditation?
2. When are the hardest times for you to praise God?
3. How does the community of faith keep you in the proper mindset before God?
4. What has God done for you? How does this memory help you praise Him?