

Breathe: 5. Discovering Joy
Psalm 150
August 6, 2017
Pastor Tami

The Aquatennial is a celebration of Minnesota's lakes, rivers and streams held in late July. Have you heard of it? Have you attended? Jerry and I have some really great friends who host a gathering every year on the final night for the fireworks show. Dan and Karen arrive early in the day to stake out their spot. It's the same great site every year near the Stone Arch Bridge. They bring in a canopy and a grill, a cooler full of food and drinks and chairs and then they sit and wait because their party (they call it the Big Ooo Ahh) doesn't begin until 6 p.m. Dan is an excellent grill chef and Karen is an amazing cook. So as the sun sets we enjoy delicious food and wonderful friends and the mounting anticipation for the show. And for good reason, this show uses over 10,000 pounds of explosives and attracts a quarter of a million people. It is considered one of the top five fireworks displays in the country.

And when 10 p.m. arrives, the show begins. It begins simply and predictably. Lovely, balanced, one could even say politely. But as it progresses, it become bigger, louder and more frenetic. The shells sail higher and with greater frequency, all building in anticipation and urgency to the BIG FINALE, the part of the show that we've all been waiting for! In the final few minutes, every tool in the firework arsenal is detonated to create the most memorable, awe-inspiring, better-than-ever finish! Can you imagine what a fireworks show would be without a big finale? What if it ended like it began? Disappointing, at best. Well, today's scripture, Psalm 150 is to the book of Psalms like the finale is to the fireworks show.

But before we dig into Psalm 150, I thought it might be helpful to get an overview of the entire book of Psalms. We have time, right? The next service doesn't start until 10:30. I'm kidding...of course. But I do think this is helpful. The Psalms...they run the gamut: deep cries of lament, passionate prayers for forgiveness and mercy, requests for horrible acts of violence against the enemy and exuberant praise. What are we supposed to do with these prayers, especially when they don't resonate with our lives at this particular time? In preparing for today's message, I came across several references to Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann's insights on how to read and apply the Psalms to our lives. (I think that's God telling me that I am supposed to share this with you today.) So here goes!

Brueggemann suggests that there are three movements of life and that there are Psalms for each movement. The first movement is a time of Orientation. This is a period of life where things are going well. You feel settled. There is no fear and no surprises. The world is well-ordered and reliable. God is trustworthy. Life is good. Not awesome, but good. You can sense God with you and so you sing songs of praise and give thanks for God's goodness. Like our hymn this morning, "Praise to the Lord the Almighty, the King of creation." Or like last week's Psalm 23: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." And during times of Orientation, maybe because things are so going well, we can forget to pray, or read the Bible, or go to church or that we even need God. The times of orientation don't last forever and we eventually will find ourselves in the second movement, the times of disorientation.

These are periods in your life where you feel like your life is completely falling apart. Maybe someone you love dies, or you lose your job or received a diagnosis of cancer. Or maybe you are covered in a deep depression that just sucks the life and joy out of you everyday. And you pray to God, "Help me." But when God's answer doesn't come quick enough, our despair can turn to anger and we pray psalms like Psalm 13 from 2 weeks ago, "How long? How long are

you going to forget me, God?" Psalms of Disorientation help us to air our grievances, anger, disappointments and complaints to God. They give us permission to be angry and scream at God if necessary. Even our cries of anger and confusion are acts of faith. We are still crying out to God even if anger is all we have. And the most famous Psalm of Disorientation is the one that Jesus was praying when he hung on the cross, Psalm 22, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus was praying the psalms as he hung on the cross. And do you know how all but one of the Psalms of Disorientation end? "Yet, I will trust you." Because, thankfully, we know this too, times of disorientation, like the times of orientation, do not last forever either. We eventually hit bottom and begin to emerge on the other side into the last movement, a time of Reorientation.

These are times that are not simply a return to the old ways but to a new, exciting answer. These are not "natural" outcomes but ones brought about by God. Maybe you got a new job after months of unemployment, or your medical tests came back as good or better than you could ever imagine. How do you feel? You're ecstatic! You want to shout for joy, call everyone you know and tell them your good news. Psalms of Reorientation are like Psalm 30, "I will exalt you O God because you pulled me out of the depths." But, like the other two, times of Reorientation don't last forever and eventually, you'll find yourself settled back into a time of Orientation. And so it goes. This is the cycle of our lives and there is a psalm for every season of our lives.

And Psalm 150 is the final chapter in the Book of Psalms, is the last word, the exclamation mark at the end of the sentence, the big "TA DA" to the entire book of Psalms. One last rush of praise for all creation to make sure we get it. Hallelujah! Praise God! The command "to praise" occurs 13 times in just 6 short verses. It's like an insistent drum beat driving us to the end. It's not a suggestion but a command. "To praise" comes from the Hebrew word "hallelu". For those of you who remember your rules of grammar, it's a plural imperative, a command to praise God and not just for the individual but for the entire community. And "jah" is shorthand for *Yahweh*, Hebrew for the personal name of God. Everyone, everything, praise God. Hallelujah, praise God!

We see here that praise of God is the vocation of all of creation but is especially imperative for humans. We were created in God's image and capable of being aware that the Creator has given us instructions on how to live life. We were not designed to do life alone but to live life in community. Jesus' taught us to love one another and care for one another. To share meals, pray and encourage one another so that our lives can be offerings of praise to God. Our praise cannot simply be a response to what is good in the moments when we are inclined to be thankful but a moment-by-moment attitude of gratefulness that honors God for our very being, not just as individuals but as an entire community. If we read Psalm 150 with an understanding of Brueggemann's cycle of life, understanding the whole story, then we are able to read and apply it in a mature, balanced manner. When we keep in mind the deep laments, suffering and sin written about in the first 149 psalms, this one call us to a deeper faith, a faith that can praise the Lord in every circumstance. Authentically praising God, especially in times when it seems downright impossible to praise God, can help us find our way to joy. *It's because* of Jesus' suffering, death and resurrection we can still believe that God makes all things work together for good for those who love God. (Romans 8:28). I think knowing this keeps us from making light of or over-using the phrase, "Praise the Lord." This psalm is not a "Don't Worry, Be Happy" kind of praise but instead a full hearted, full orchestra, full voiced "Hallelujah!"

Are you familiar with Handel's *Messiah* and the final movement, the "Hallelujah Chorus"? When I was a choir director my favorite part of this entire work, and what I think sums up the 150th

psalm in one word, is near the end. There's that moment, right before the last measure, where the chorus and orchestra all pause...and a holy silence fills the room. Then with one last breath, (breathe) the orchestra and voices all enter in unison with one mighty and joy-filled, "Ha-le-lu-jah!"

Psalm 150 gives us the "why" we are to praise God and the "how" to praise God, But we have to look at Psalm 148 for a specific list of the "who" is to praise God. Angels and heavenly hosts, water and skies, sea creatures, lightening, hail, snow and clouds, mountains and hills, fruit and cedar trees, wild animals, cattle, small creatures, flying birds, kings of earth, princes, young men, maidens, old men and children. Whew! That is an exhaustive list and in it we see no separation between human beings and the rest of God's creation. We were designed, to live together with all of creation, to praise God.

In fact, Psalm 150 begins with a command...I like the way Eugene Peterson's *The Message* states it. "Praise God in his holy house of worship, praise him under the open skies." Do you know that 99.9% of our evolutionary history has been spent in natural environments. Our bodies are created to thrive in nature. But today we spend most of our time indoors, connected to our devices with no time to just hang out outside. One recent study found that workplace stress is linked to about \$150 billion a year in health care cost. I was recently listening to an NPR program on Forest Bathing. Forest bathing is a practice started by Japanese scientists to reconnect people with nature. It's a cross between taking a hike and meditation. A guide, much like a yoga instructor in a yoga class, helps people slow down and immerse themselves in the forest and enjoy the pleasure of presence, to relieve stress and find joy; to hear the insects, smell the trees, see the vibrant colors, all things that may be missed when we don't slow down. There are several proven health benefits to Forest Bathing. It lowers our blood pressure and our heart rate and increases our immunity systems. It's a natural remedy to stress. So much so that our National Park System has rolled out their "Park Prescription Program". It's purpose is to help healthcare providers get their patients back out into nature. If the founders of this movement get their way, one day soon, you may be able to get a prescription to take a walk in nature. A walk in nature gives us a stillness and a calm that give us time to breath and be drawn closer to God and creation and rediscover joy.

At the end of May, twelve of us from Messiah Church spent a week in service on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota. While this experience was a heart-breaking illustration of oppression and marginalization at its worse, it was also a testimony to the strength and perseverance of the human spirit and a personal glimpse at the relationship between the Native Americans and the Creator. In spite of all the forces that have worked for centuries to oppress them, they are a joy-filled people who believe that there is no separation between people, nature and the Creator. Their culture is in fact, one with nature, birthed from Mother Earth. There is a lot that we can learn from our Indian neighbors.

In preparation for our trip to the reservation, we read several books to help us have a better understanding of the Native American culture. Several of the books that we read were by Minneapolis born author, Kent Nerburn. Mr. Nerburn has published 16 books that focus on the Native American culture. I think I can speak for most of the group when I say one of our favorites was *Neither Wolf Nor Dog*. It tells the story of two men, one white, the author, Kent, and the other, a Native American elder named Dan. It dispels the myths and stereotypes of the Native American life. Here's an excerpt that illustrates the relationship between the Native Americans and the Creator. This is the elder, Dan, speaking to Kent about his ancestors. "*The white people surprised us when they came. Those of us out west had heard about them. Some of our elders had told us prophecies about them. But still, they surprised us. We had seen other*

strangers before. But they were just other people like us-other Indians-from different tribes. They would come and ask us to pass through our land. If we wanted them to, we would let them. Otherwise, they couldn't. But you see, it wasn't our land like we owned it. It was the land where we hunted or where our ancestors were buried. It was the land that the Creator gave us. It was the land where our sacred stories took place. It had sacred places on it. Our ceremonies were here. We knew the animals. They knew us. We watched the seasons pass on this land. It was alive, like our grandparents. It gave us life for our bodies and life for our spirits. We were part of it.

So we would let people pass through it, if they needed to, because it was our land and they knew it. We did not wish them to hunt or disturb our sacred places. But they could come to the land if they needed to. You need to understand this. We did not think we owned the land. The land was part of us. We didn't even know about owning the land. It was like talking about owning your grandmother. You can't own your grandmother. Why would you talk about owning her?

So when first your people came, they just wanted to go through. They were strange to us. They wore strange clothes. They smelled different. But they had many powers we had never seen. They were part of the Creator's plan, we thought. It was not our place to deny them, because it was not our right to control them. We were just living our lives. They promised they would do no damage...But then these strangers shot animals just to kill them. They left them lying in the gullies. They made paths through the land that were heavier than our paths. These people came like a river through the land.

We had never seen the kind of things they did. For us, the earth was alive. To move a stone was to change her. To kill an animal was to take from her. There had to be respect. We saw no respect from these people. They chopped down trees and left animals lay where they were shot. They made loud noises. They seemed like wild people. They were heavy on the land and they were loud.

Then something strange happened. These new people started asking us for land. We did not know what to say. How could they ask for land? They wanted to give us money for the land. They would give us money for the land if their people could live on it. Our people didn't want this. There was something wrong to the Creator in taking money for the land. There was something wrong to our grandparents and our ancestors to take money for the land.

And here is something that I think is important, your religion didn't come from the land. It could be carried around with you. You couldn't understand what it meant to us to have our religion in the land. Your religion was in a cup and a piece of bread, and could be carried around in a box. Your priest could make it sacred anywhere. You couldn't understand that what was sacred for us was where we were, because that is where the sacred things had happened and where the spirits talked to us. Your people didn't know about the land being sacred and we didn't know about the land being property.

This is what you have to understand. To us, the land was alive. It talked to us. We called her our mother. If she was angry with us, she gave us no food. If we didn't share with others, she might send harsh winters or plagues of insects. We had to do good for her and live the way she thought was right. She was the mother to everything that lived upon her, so everything was our brother and sister. If we didn't treat them right, our mother would be angry. If we treated them with respect and honor, she would be proud.

How could we people ever talk together when we each believed our God had told us something different about the land? We couldn't and we never did. But you were stronger. There were more of you, so your way won out. You took the land and you turned it into property. Now our mother is silent. But we still listen for her voice.

At one with the earth, listening for her voice. Listening for God's voice. You may be asking, how do I do that? How do I listen for God's voice? Over the past 5 weeks, Steve and I have offered scriptures that we think can help with this. Do you remember them?

Be still and know that I am God.
Build your life on the rock, Jesus.
Cry out to God.
Trust the Good Shepherd.
Praise the Lord.

You know, we introduced this series in the summer time so that you could actually step outside and experience the glory of God's nature on full display! So here's your homework this week. Are you ready? Get outside! Remember, Jesus retreated into the wilderness to pray and be renewed at the beginning of his ministry. And again - right before he was arrested when he went into the garden to pray. Scientists have found that when we get outside and breathe in forest air - air that is filled with tree fragrances, air that contain essential oils like cedar and pine, our health improves. Breathing forest air versus blank air (indoor air) leads to drops in blood pressure and stress hormones.

Jerry and I recently became members of the University of Minnesota Arboretum. Have you been there? It's a sanctuary of nature where one can escape the noise and busyness of everyday living, where God's handiwork is on full display. I can personally recommend the Fern Garden and the Wildlife Garden. These are places where transformative moments can take place when all of God's creation rubs elbows. So go outside and take a walk or a boat ride, dig in a garden. Sit or stand outside and observe the ways in which nature praises God. And BREATHE...Just breathe and experience being a part of God's entire creation, the way we were created to be and where all of God's creation can praise God to our full capacity and rediscover joy!

Grow, Pray, Study for Week of August 6, 2017

Weekly Prayer: God of all creation, my deepest desire is to glorify you. My deep delight is in your presence, my fondest thoughts are of you, my strongest longing is for your house. This week, help me to remember who I was meant to be-- part of a community that breathes thankfulness, voicing your praise and finding my joy in you. Amen.

Monday, August 7

Scripture: Psalm 24

The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; for he founded it on the seas and established it on the waters. Who may ascend the mountain of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place? The one who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not trust in an idol or swear by a false god.

Observation: This psalm may be the cry of the people of Israel as they entered the gates of Jerusalem, the destiny of their pilgrimage. They had traveled with the awareness that the entire earth belongs to God. The people of Israel did not live with a sense of separation between nature and themselves. They worshipped God, the Creator, who made all things.

Application: Because the earth is the Lord's, all of us are the stewards or caretakers and we should be mindful and committed to caring for it and its resources. Is there a change that you

can make in your day-to-day life to take better care of God's creation? Conserve water. Start a recycling bin in your home. Shop with reusable bags. Walk instead of taking the car.

Prayer: Creator God, please forgive me for sometimes forgetting that everything in creation is yours, created for the sole purpose of glorifying you. May I remember today to say thank you and celebrate being an integral, special and unique part of your wondrous work. Amen.

Tuesday, August 8

Scripture: Psalm 51:10-17

Create in me a pure heart, O God and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. Then I will teach transgressors your ways, so that sinners will turn back to you. Deliver me from the guilt of bloodshed, O God, you who are God my Savior, and my tongue will sing of your righteousness. Open my lips, Lord, and my mouth will declare your praise. You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.

Observation: This psalm is attributed to David, and is a passionate plea for mercy, forgiveness and cleansing. It is likely that this was David's prayer after he committed adultery with Bathsheba and then arranged for her husband, Uriah, to be killed in battle and was then confronted about it by the prophet, Nathan.

Application: Like David, we must ask God to cleanse us from within, cleansing our hearts and spirits for new thoughts and desires. God wants us to be close and experience a full and complete life with God but we must first confess our sins so we can be forgiven and restored.

Prayer: Dear Lord, look closely at my heart even if I try to hide it from you. Wash it clean and forgive me for the mistakes that I have made. Renew my spirit and let my mouth sing of your goodness and blessings so that I may be a living, breathing witness to the power of your love. Amen.

Wednesday, August 9

Scripture: Psalm 65: 1-4, 12-13

Praise awaits you, our God, in Zion; to you our vows will be fulfilled. You who answer prayer, to you all people will come. When we were overwhelmed by sins, you forgave our transgressions. Blessed are those you choose and bring near to live in your courts! We are filled with the good things of your house, of your holy temple.

The grasslands of the wilderness overflow; the hills are clothed with gladness. The meadows are covered with flocks and the valleys are mantled with grain; they shout for joy and sing.

Observation: This psalm celebrates the sustenance and bounty of the harvest and the salvation of God's people. It ends with an expression of hope in the restoration of the harvest, a hope in which the very creation expresses joy! It refuses to compartmentalize or prioritize God's gracious activities.

Application: In times of hardships, try to remember and find assurance in the awesomeness of God's past deeds, the wonder of God's power over creation and the abundant harvest God brought to past generations. And always offer praise.

Prayer: Good, gracious and loving God, when I look at nature and remember your blessings in my past, help me to remember and trust that you can still make all things work together for the good of those who love you. Amen.

Thursday, August 10

Scripture: Psalm 71:17-18

Since my youth, God, you have taught me, and to this day I declare your marvelous deeds. Even when I am old and gray, do not forsake me, my God, till I declare your power to the next generation, your mighty acts to all who are to come.

Observation: This psalm is the anguished prayer of an elderly member of the community who now is nearing the end of his/her life. The psalmist, perhaps David, does not forget to praise God and is willing to wait patiently for God to act and we can sense a gradual letting go of fear.

Application: When we recall God's goodness in the past, we are reassured that "You who have made me see many troubles and calamities will restore my life again; from the depths of the earth you will bring me up again." When we tell our stories to one another, it creates mutual support and encouragement, especially in the times when it is hard to praise God. Is there someone you know of who could use a friend today? Can you be that person who offers support and encouragement?

Prayer: Beloved Lord, you know my weaknesses and my strengths. My big heart and good intentions can shrink in an instance. Rescue me and deliver me. Listen to me and save me so that I can be an encourager to others when they are experiencing difficulties in their life. Amen.

Friday, August 11

Scripture: Psalm 148

Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights above. Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his heavenly hosts. Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars. Praise him, you highest heavens and you waters above the skies. Let them praise the name of the Lord, for at his command they were created, and he established them forever and ever—he issued a decree that will never pass away. Praise the Lord from the earth, you great sea creatures and all ocean depths, lightning and hail, snow and clouds, stormy winds that do his bidding, you mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars, wild animals and all cattle, small creatures and flying birds, kings of the earth and all nations, you princes and all rulers on earth, young men and women, old men and children. Let them praise the name of the Lord, for his name alone is exalted; his splendor is above the earth and the heavens. And he has raised up for his people a horn, the praise of all his faithful servants, of Israel, the people close to his heart. Praise the Lord.

Observation: This psalm is a hymn of praise that shifts from the "why" to praise God, as we have seen in the previous psalms, to simply a command to praise God. As Nike says, "Just do it!" There is no separation between humans and everything else in God's creation. Praising God is the sole purpose of all of God's creation and a place of pure joy.

Application: All creation is like the unique instruments of a symphony orchestra playing together in unison, called to offer our praise to God. Each part is both independent and yet, part of the whole. We offer our unique harmonious part in praise to God precisely as we were created to be. Can you find room today to be still, breathe and look for God in creation? What “instrument” do you play so to respond to God’s good acts with your gratefulness and praise?

Prayer: Lord, I offer my life to you. Help me to walk in your ways. Make me the person you want me to be. Lead me in your path so that others may come to know your grace, power and love. Amen.

Saturday, August 12

Scripture: Psalm 150

Praise the Lord. Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens. Praise him for his acts of power; praise him for his surpassing greatness. Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet, praise him with the harp and lyre, praise him with timbrel and dancing, praise him with the strings and pipe, praise him with the clash of cymbals, praise him with resounding cymbals. Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Praise the Lord.

Observation: This final psalm is the big “ta-dah” of the book of Psalms. Like the finale at a fireworks show, it is meant to muster up all the praise possible so that everyone, everything, everywhere, no exceptions, works together to praise God as God intended for all of creation.

Application: How could the message be more clear? The writer of this psalm is telling the individual listener to praise God, yet sometimes we are not sure how to do it. In this scripture, there are several suggestions; with dance and voice, and with musical instruments. How will you choose to praise God today?

Prayer: Loving Creator, I am an Easter person and 'Hallelujah' is my song! I will praise you in your sanctuary and outside in nature; with singing and dancing and with trumpet and clanging cymbals. With my every breath, I will praise you. Amen.