

Praise God in God's Sanctuary – End of Summer

Psalm 150

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Our girls have been participating in a drama camp this summer that happens at Sydenham Street United Church – now a building called, The Spire. Their performances have happened in the sanctuary – the place where the organ and the pews are... but their counsellors all summer called it 'the seminary'. And no matter how many times our girls gently corrected them, they kept calling it the seminary. A seminary is a school where pastors and priests go to learn theology and how to be pastors... A sanctuary is something quite different. It is a place of worship.

Now, that word – sanctuary – carries a lot of weight and history. Some people love that word. Some people don't like that word. One of my predecessors in my old church wanted to call the sanctuary of that church the 'auditorium' and the sermons that he preached, 'teachings'... And I think I might know why (I could be wrong on this)... but it has to do with one of the strong threads of the Reformation of the church in the 16th and 17th centuries... There was a move at that time, that continued through the centuries to this day, away from thinking of things and places as divide-able into sacred things and secular things—sacred places and secular places. Sanctified/Sanctuary places and non-sanctified/non-sanctuary places. To say that worship happens in a sanctuary has a way of dividing our worship from the rest of life. And one very strong thread of the Reformation says that worship is all of life.

Fill Thou My Life O Lord My God in EVERY part with praise
that my whole being may proclaim thy being and thy ways.
Not for the lip of praise alone, nor e'en the praising heart.
I ask but for a life made up of praise in EVERY part.

Amen. All of life is worship. We don't only praise God in God's sanctuary, we praise God in God's mighty heavens. I was struck, when we went around at the beginning of our council retreat, talking about life-giving moments of our summers – almost all of us had a reflection on some awesome moment that we spent with members of our family OUTSIDE... I talked about when Tim and I went to Rock Dunder... and there were memories on the lake, in the Adirondacks, in the forest. Praise God in the heavens of God's strength.

AMEN – and yet... sometimes this thread of the Reformation has been so strong that in some contexts, what happens in a church together on Sunday mornings has taken a back seat... or even been left off the vehicle all together. James K.A. Smith writes, “Since all of life is worship, the argument goes, then the gathered worship of the church seems, well, *optional*, perhaps even unnecessary. The library and laboratory are on par with the chapel, even preferred over the chapel.”¹ And I experienced this... When I was a philosophy and psychology major at Dordt (now University), my professors were all encouraging me to go into philosophy or into psychology... Go, get your PhD, they said. Only go to seminary if nothing else works (not because I was a woman, I don’t think, but because the sanctuary (and the seminary) were seen as ‘less than.’

And I would argue that worshiping God in a sanctuary of gathered people at a regular time each week is not just legitimate, it is necessary and important for our walk with the Lord. Why? Well, first of all, gathered worship in a sanctuary is something we do *together*... and that we’re called to do *together*. This rubs against our individualist tendencies... We tend to think of worship as an expression that can happen in all of life – and maybe best when we are all by ourselves. I am not going to say that we don’t experience God and praise God when we are by ourselves outdoors... but part of what forms us into disciples that truly follow and praise is by worshiping together – together with people that are different from us – together with people that can hold up a mirror to our lives so that we can see, you know what? Everything is not just right here... (this softens us like sea glass is softened).

The word that shows up over and over again in Psalm 150 and is translated as Praise the Lord is actually in Hebrew, Hallelu-jah... *Hallelu* means “Praise” and *Jah* means the “Lord” ... But *Hallelu* is 2nd person plural... My African American pastor friend, Angela, was one of my pastors for a while, and she would ask the church to say Hallelujah with her and she would get us to say it like this, HalleLU-jah! And the LU part was the all you-plural part. It means y’all praise the Lord. Maybe even more than that - *All* y’all praise the Lord.

¹ “The Sanctification of Ordinary Life” - <https://www.reformedworship.org/article/march-2012/sanctification-ordinary-life/?omhide=true>



Worship is something that we do – in all of life, but quite particularly in church – together. So, it's not just Hallelujah - Praise the Lord – it's HalleLUjah! ALL Y'ALL praise the Lord!

And... worship is not just something that we do – not just something we ALL do, it something that is done *to* us (and not just me, to us). Now, wait, what? Worship is done to us? How can this be? Worship is a verb... Praise is a verb... with a subject of you or me – or y'all or us... How is worship something that is done *to* us. Listen again to James K.A. Smith: “Christian worship is ... a *formative* practice precisely because worship is ... a “downward” encounter in which God is the primary actor. Worship isn't just something we do; it does something to us. Worship is a space where we are *nourished* by Word and sacrament—we eat the Word and eat the bread that is the Word of life. ... We are made into people of praise.”

God does things in this space to all of us! Yes, we can get out the trumpet and the harp and the timbrel and the cymbals... we can dance and sing... but this is also the place where we experience together God's mighty acts of power and his surpassing greatness. Sometimes in big ways, like when it thundered right in the middle of a sermon once... but more often in the simple rhythms of the movements of a worship service, where God greets us, God speaks words of assurance to us in the midst of our sin and sadness, God teaches us, God feeds us, God blesses us.

And we need this shaping that happens in this place where we rehearse the gospel story week after week... We need this shaping so that we can face the hard stuff of life... and so that we can die well.

The story of God's love for us from Creation through the fall and redemption to the New Creation is a story that we rehearse the hills and valleys of each way – a story that shapes us to face the brokenness that is everywhere in our life. It gives us space to grieve, to confess... space to wait in silence... space to hope and to build.

We don't see the hard stuff in Psalm 150... We also, incidentally, don't see the hard stuff in the first Psalm of the psalter – Psalm 1 – that talks about the way of the righteous prospering and the way of the wicked perishing... Psalm 1 makes obedience sound simple and Psalm 150 makes praise sound only natural... but in psalms 2 through 149, we get all the other hard stuff of life... all the frustration and complaints when it seems like good things are happening to bad people and bad things are happening to good people... all the lament when life is falling apart... all the rehearsings of the difficulties of life. It's all in there. And so, Psalm 150 – though so pure in its call to praise – is a psalm, that has the wisdom of the trenches of the rest of the psalter behind it.

The shaping that happens in worship is for the purpose of helping us to face the difficult rhythms of our life with resonance and hope... but the rhythms that happen in worship also shape us to face the final drumbeats of our death. The last verse of Psalm 150 is this: Let everything that has breath, praise the Lord. The word for breath there doesn't show up lots and lots of times in the Old Testament... The first time we see it is in the very beginning, in Genesis 2, when God breathes the breath of life into humanity. The breath is a gift of God... But the next 15 times or so that it shows up, it is in the context of breath being taken away – in the flood – or in the extermination of peoples through the book of Joshua. Breath is a gift that will not last forever on this earth. It is a precious gift – and it is a universal gift... it is not only given to a select few – and not only given to humans... but a gift given to all humans, and to the animal world as well. But it is a gift that will not last forever on this earth. We will, each of us, have a last breath.

Flannery O'Connor has a short story called, *Revelation*.² And the main character is a woman named Mrs. Turpin. Most of the story is set in a doctor's office where Mrs. Turpin sits,

² The end of this story is re-told and reflected on in *A Theological Introduction to the book of Psalms*, by J. Clinton McCann, pp. 68-70.

looking at all the other people in the doctor's office and thanking God that she is not like them. She says to herself, "What if Jesus had said, 'All right, you can be white-trash or a [black person] or ugly!'" The horror.

And then, true horror, a young girl in the waiting room with her, a girl Mrs. Turpin has deemed 'ugly,' attacks her and yells, "Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog." And this completely discombobulates Mrs. Turpin... Later that day, she is cleaning out her and her husband, Claud's hog pen, and she starts talking to God through her discombobulation: "How am I a hog? ... Exactly how am I like them?" And in a final surge of fury she roars, 'Who do you think you are?' And she stares at the pigs in the pen... at the old sow, and the other pigs around her... contemplating who she is and who God is... and what this all means...

And then Mrs. Turpin looks up from the hog pen at the sky and she sees a purple streak in the sky, and I'll quote this bit in full:

A visionary light settled in her eyes. She saw the streak as a vast swimming bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and black [people] dressed in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behaviour. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away.... In a moment the vision faded but she remained where she was, immobile.

At length she got down and turned off the faucet and made her slow way on the darkening path back to the house. In the woods around her the invisible cricket choruses had struck up, but what she heard were the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah.

HalleLUjah. All y'all, praise the Lord. Hallelujah...