

bible⁺study: january 2017

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Based on the scripture lessons of Cokesbury's Adult Bible Study Series

January 1, 2017 Text: Psalm 33:1-9 "Praising God the Creator"

The Social Principles of The United Methodist Church state: "We recognize science as a legitimate interpretation of God's natural world. We affirm the validity of the claims of science in describing the natural world and in determining what is scientific. We preclude science from making authoritative claims about theological issues and theology from making authoritative claims about scientific issues."

Over the next few weeks, we are going to be exploring some of the theological emphases in the psalter. This week's study, for example, is a poetic statement of the creative presence of God. Interestingly enough, the psalmist celebrates not only the creation of the skies (v.6), the oceans (v. 7), and the earth (v. 8), but also justice and righteousness (v. 5). There is, for us, a temptation to enjoy the created order while we set aside the companion acts of God in calling for justice and righteousness.

Because of this blending of justice/righteousness with the acknowledgment of God's creation, we are at the intersection of God's purposes and human activity. Care for the environment is one obvious meeting place for these concerns. Terms like "global warming, "carbon footprint," and "greenhouse gas" become the vocabulary for struggling with what it means to live out faithfully both of these emphases of Psalm 33:5-9.

The psalmist underscores one way to be faithful in these matters: the praise of God. (vv. 1-3). And note that one way to praise God is by doing the right (v. 1). The psalmist will not let us separate our praise of the Creator from the way we treat the creation!

In my backyard is a pile of rocks, carefully gathered by one of my grandsons years ago. He wandered around, picking up the fascinating variety of stones and pebbles that are scattered around this rural property. He showed them to his grandmother and said, "Look, Mama J., at all the different kinds of rocks God has made." Amen.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *50 Ideas You Really Need to Know: Religion* (Quereus), Peter Stanford has quoted Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople: "The image we have of ourselves is reflected in the way we treat the creation. If we believe that we are no more than consumers, then we shall seek fulfillment in consuming the whole Earth; but if we believe we are made in the image of God, we shall act with care and compassion, striving to become what we are created to be."

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "We praise You! We thank You! We celebrate You, Creator God!..."

January 8, 2017 Text: Psalm 96:1-6, 10-13 "All Creation Overflows with Praise"

These verses contain an array of things for which God is to be praised: saving work (v. 2), wondrous works (v. 3), created heaven (v. 5), the Lord rules (v. 10), sets the world in place (v. 10), judges all people fairly (v. 10), coming to establish justice (v. 13), establish justice among all people fairly (v. 13).

What are we to do to thank God for all these splendid gifts? The psalmist says to sing (vv. 1-2) and to declare (v. 3).

The Hebrew language has several words for "singing." (My favorite is the one whose root is in the word "to creak." Perhaps the psalmist has heard me sing!) The word used here is one often uses for traveling minstrels, those who sing as they journey from place to place. That is a clear reminder of the Israelites' escape from Egypt, the long walk toward the Promised Land, and the ongoing movements of the Hebrew people. Keep singing as you keep moving! That's not a bad bit of advice for us as we stumble from place to place on life's unmapped territory!

The word "declare" (v. 3) comes from the word that is used for making marks when keeping score. The psalmist is "keeping score" on what all God has done; note the words: glory (v. 3), wondrous (v. 3), great (v. 4), worthy (v. 4), awesome (v. 4), grandeur (v. 6), strength (v. 6), beauty (v. 6). That's a pretty good list to declare!

What's this about singing a new song? "New song" also shows up in Isaiah 42:10 and in Revelation 5:9 and 14:3. Looking at Psalm 96:1, I cannot resist sharing a story told me by one of my seminary professors. Professor Kelsey said that he once had a church member come up to him and say, "Reverend, all I can say is that if they are going to sing a new song in heaven, then I'm not going!"

Perhaps the emphasis on "new" song is because with God, it is never "business as usual." From the time of Moses and Miriam (Exodus 15:1, 21) to Jesus and the disciples in the upper room (Matthew 26:30) to Paul and Silas in prison (Acts 16:25) to the elders around the throne in heaven (Revelation 5:9), singing is what God's people do.

What Someone Else Has Said:

Erik Routley (*Christian Hymns Observed*, Prestige) has noted: "So, if you know what hymns a person loves most, or what hymns a congregation is most addicted to, you will be able to infer what, in Christianity, means most to that person or that church. And that inference

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "O for a thousand tongues to sing..."

January, 15, 2017 Text: Psalm 65:1-2, 9-13 "Praise God the Provider"

The psalmist is so bubbling over with praise that even silence is seen as praise (CEB, Psalm 65:1). The Hebrew word translated as "silence" means "quiet waiting" and most translators have put the emphasis on the "waiting." (KJV—"praise waiteth" ... NRSV---"praise is due" ... NIV---"praise awaits" ... NEB---"we owe thee"). A few persons have rendered this verse with the highlighting on the "quiet," "the silence."

It is interesting to consider that "silence" (v. 1) is coupled with "God's listening" (v. 2). This certainly opens the door to the realization that God hears us even when we do not speak! This is both good news and bad news! God hears the unspoken gratitude of my heart, but God also hears the quiet selfishness of my heart. The psalmist must have sensed this because the very next verse (v. 3) speaks of God's gracious forgiveness of our sins---even our unspoken sins.

In the closing verses of this psalm, even the hills and the valleys break

forth in joy. The word the psalmist has used to express this joy is the same word that expresses the excitement of welcome, the happiness of hospitality. (Might we compare this to the joy a grandparent feels when a grandchild comes to visit?) It is as if the created order itself (water, crops, deserts, pastures, hills, meadowlands, valley, grain---vv. 9-13) are thrilled to be able to offer its bounty to its human companions. The "joy"---hospitality, welcome-- in this praise of God is a sign that humans and the rest of creation understand that "we are in this together."

Psalm 65 celebrates the intent of God to provide for God's creation. Sometimes, it seems as if the creation has turned against us. We recognize that all of creation has been impacted by the Fall (Genesis 3:6-7, Colossians 1:21). God has created all for good (1 Timothy 4:4) and Jesus Christ has reconciliation for all of creation (Colossians 1:19-20).

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Those of us who are “professional talkers” seldom praise God with silence! Writing this series of Bible studies means I use a lot of words. (If I figure correctly, this is number 792 in these weekly ruminations.) Now, after reflecting on this psalm, I am left to wonder: When is God better praised by what I say and when is God better praised by what I leave unsaid? Hmmm.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *The Worshiping Body* (WJK), Kim Long has said: “The nonverbal components (of worship) include elements such as silence—‘not the

embarrassed, barren, uncontrolled lack of sound which occurs when things break down and no one knows what to say or do,’ but rather silence that ‘is purposeful, pregnant, and controlled—the thunderous quiet of people communicating that which escapes being put into mere words.’”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “With voice, with quiet, I praise You...”

January 22, 2017 Text: Psalm 104:1-4, 24-30 “Praise God the Creator”

God is beyond our ability to describe, so we resort to anthropomorphic descriptions. In these verses from Psalm 104, God is depicted as wearing clothes (v. 2), having a house (v. 3), riding in a BMW---well, actually the text says “chariot” (v. 3), having assistants (v. 4), toymaker (v. 26); short order cook (v. 27), having hands (v. 28), having a face (v. 29), and given to heavy breathing (v. 30). The psalmist is grasping to find ways of speaking of God, but experiences and language have their limitations!

Did you know that a cache line is really the granularity of allocation and refills of a cache, typically 32-128 bytes in size? Did you know that load-store architecture is an instruction set architecture where arithmetic/logic instructions may only be performed between processor registers, relying on separate load/store instructions for all data transfers? Did you know the executable compression is the mathematics of Kolmogorov complexity describing the challenges and limits of this feature?

No, I didn’t either. I shamelessly stole that information from Wikipedia.

But, do you notice how difficult it is to talk about a subject when the vocabulary is foreign to your experience? No wonder the psalmist resorts to using everyday descriptions! The psalmist knows God is not a human being, but the writer uses human descriptors because folks

will be able to get what is being said!

And what is being said? God continues to engage God’s creation (v. 3). The creation is dependent on God (v. 27). God is worthy of the best we can offer (v. 1).

This psalm –including a portion that is not included in the study text—opens and closes with the same phrase: “Let my whole being bless the Lord!” (Psalm 104:1a, 35b). It is as if when all is said and done, all that can said and done is to praise God. “My whole being” suggests that I praise God by the way I live, by the way I relate to others, by the way I acknowledge God. It is as Jesus said: “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, and with all your mind... You must love your neighbor as you love yourself” (Matthew 22:37, 39).

What Someone Else Has Said:

Letty Russell (*Human Liberation in a Feminist Perspective*, Westminster) wrote: “The changing of language has the power to change the way people think about and name the world, as well as being a way of demonstrating in fact that ‘you are all one in Christ Jesus’ (Gal.3:28).”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “God of many names...”

January 29, 2017 Text: Psalm 148 “All Creation Praises God”

Walking through a cemetery can be a moving, emotional, entertaining, mystifying, informative, and fascinating experience. The other day I went Oakwood Cemetery in Siler City (My wife, Toni, is buried there). Seeing the names on the tombstones was like re-visiting my childhood in Siler City. Then, of course, I checked out Frances Bavier’s grave (Remember Aunt Bee on “The Andy Griffith Show?”). Usually, there are bottled pickles on her tombstone; this time, I saw only coins and baubles. I wandered into an area of the cemetery where I had not been before. One marker gave the birth-marriage-death of a woman who was wed in Greece at the age of fourteen. And, of course, I took the time to talk to each member of my family buried there.

Every step in the cemetery releases some story. Everywhere you look opens up another thought. And that is what is happening to the psalmist in this week’s study text: Psalm 148. The writer is not in a cemetery, but the experience is the same: everywhere he looks he sees something that stirs a memory or that gets him to thinking. Unlike a cemetery where one is reminded of death, the psalmist is looking all around him at life. And each look stirs another view, another celebration.

Heavens (v. 1). Angels/messengers (v. 2). God’s forces (v. 2). Waters (v. 4). Earth (v. 7). Sea monsters (v. 7). Fire (v. 8). Hail (v. 8). Snow (v. 8). Frost (v. 8). Wind (v. 8). Mountains and hills (v. 9). Fruit trees (v. 9). Cedar trees (v. 9). Wild animals (v. 10). Cattle (v. 10).

Creeping things (v. 10)...well, you get the idea! Don’t forget kings, princes, young men and women, old men and women...The psalmist says all of these should praise God! Hallelujah is the Hebrew term for this praise

So, a visit to the cemetery or the psalmist’s look out the window---both are occasions for the full range of experience, and the bottom line is the same for both: Hallelujah! Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s (Romans 14:8). Hallelujah! All of creation is invited to praise God! Hallelujah!

There is a special role for the Israelites in leading others to praise God (v. 14). Does the Church of Jesus Christ live and love in such a way that God is praised?

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *God, Cornbread, and Elvis* (Upper Room Books), Bishop Joe E. Pennel, Jr. has observed: “The wonderful thing is that anybody can glorify God with the body. The culture in which we live says that only beautiful bodies are worth anything. Our faith says that every body can glorify God.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!...”