

Preaching on Psalms

Psalm 146:5-10, Third Sunday in Advent

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Because this is the first in a series of four essays on preaching on Psalms that will appear in successive issues of this journal, it is appropriate to begin with a brief defense of this practice. Given the church's long and distinguished history of preaching on Psalms¹, such a defense may seem to be unnecessary; however, there is still resistance to preaching on Psalms in some contemporary liturgical and homiletical quarters. For instance, in its description of "The Service for the Lord's Day," the *Book of Common Worship* offers the following guidance for using the psalm appointed for the day by the lectionary: "The singing of a psalm is appropriate at any place in the order of worship. However, the psalm appointed in the lectionary...is intended to be sung following the first reading, where it serves as a congregational meditation and response to the reading. The psalm is not intended as another reading."²

The clear implication is that the Psalms are meant to be used in worship as responses to the reading of "The Word," which is the title of the section in which the above quote appears, but that the Psalms do not qualify as "The Word," and hence are not suitable for preaching. The logic of the *Book of Common Worship* at this point is unflinchingly form-critical; that is, because the Psalms originated in worship as responses to God, they should continue to be used accordingly. The same logic apparently guides those instructors of homiletics who teach their students not to preach on the Psalms.

What this logic ignores, however, is the canonical process. Granted, the Psalms almost certainly originated in and for the worship life of ancient Israel and Judah, primarily as responses to God in prayer and praise. At some point, however, they were collected and transmitted as Scripture—as "The Word." Klaus Seybold describes the results of this process as follows: "[T]he existing Psalter now takes on the character of a documentation of divine revelation, to be used in a way analogous to the *Torah*, the first part of the canon, and becomes an instruction manual for the theological study of the divine order of salvation, and for meditation."³

If the Psalms are indeed "a documentation of divine revelation," they beg to be preached! As James L. Mays points out, "The psalms...contain more direct statements about God than any other book in the two testaments of the Christian canon."⁴ The church and its preachers simply cannot afford to ignore the Psalms in proclamation; they are clearly suitable material on which to preach.

Psalm 146, the psalm for the Third Sunday in Advent (the Revised Common Lectionary lists Ps 146:5-10 as the psalm for the day, with Luke 1:47-55 as an alternative), demonstrates admirably what Mays points out. Beginning in v. 6, it contains several "direct statements about God" and about what God has done and is doing in the world. In the following analysis, I shall focus on how Psalm 146 may function as "a documentation of divine revelation," and I shall suggest several possible directions to pursue in preaching on Psalm 146.

Verses 1-4

Even though the Revised Common Lectionary regularly dissects the psalm for the day, the interpreter should not ignore vv. 1-4, which the lectionary omits for the Third Sunday in Advent. These verses include the hymn's invitation to praise (v. 1), the statement of the psalmist's commitment to unceasing praise (v. 2), and a warning that helps us to discern what is at stake when praise becomes one's lifestyle (vv. 3-4).

Not only does Psalm 146 begin and end with "Praise the Lord!" but so also does each of Psalms 147-150, marking Psalms 146-150 as the Psalter's final collection. The invitation to "O my soul," or better translated, "my whole being," is unusual but not unique (see also Pss 103:1, 22; 104:1, 35). While this invitation focuses on the individual self, it introduces a collection that concludes in Ps 150:6 with an expansive invitation to praise, "Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!" And at the heart of this final collection of the Psalter, Psalm 148 invites virtually *everything that exists* to praise God! Thus, the literary context of Psalm 146 suggests the perhaps startling conclusion that to praise God is somehow to put our individual selves in tune with the entire universe. It is a conclusion that raises interesting questions: What does it mean that we participate in a worshipping community that includes every other living creature – "everything that breathes" (Ps 150:6; see 148:10) – and even the inanimate features of creation (see Pss 148:3-4, 7-9)? Does our response to God in praise enable the non-human creatures, and even the earth itself, to praise God by existing and by being what God created them to be?⁵ The ecological implications of these questions may be overwhelming; but at a point in the history of our planet in which species are disappearing at an alarmingly high and unprecedented rate, a hole in the ozone layer is growing noticeably each year, and the temperature of the earth is rising precipitously, these questions are well worth pondering and perhaps even pursuing in an Advent sermon. We might even find ourselves beginning to recover the nearly lost penitential dimension of this liturgical season.

If the above questions seem too staggering or overwhelming, perhaps one might want to pursue the significance of the psalmist's self-portrayal as an exemplar of lifelong praise. What does it mean to praise without ceasing? What does it mean that, in essence, praise becomes the goal of human life? These questions resonate clearly with the Reformed tradition and its understanding of the purpose of humankind. One need look no further than the first question and answer of "The Shorter Catechism":

Q. 1. What is the chief end of [hu]man[ity]?

A. [Hu]Man[ity]'s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.

In a secular era in which it sounds hopelessly naive (or embarrassingly pietistic) to say that the goal of human life is to praise God, and in a cultural context in which the concept of enjoying God is completely nonsensical, the above questions are well worth pondering and perhaps even pursuing in an Advent sermon.

A clue toward at least beginning to answer these questions is found in vv. 3-4. Praise is inseparable from the matter of where or in whom one places one's "trust" (v. 3). Given the suspicion of government in our current political context – we are all too familiar with a war that was started on the basis of "bad intelligence" – perhaps we are inclined to embrace the instruction "Do not put your trust in princes" (v. 3a). But the advice is more sweeping and challenging in v. 3b; no trust is to be placed in "humanity"

(NRSV “mortals”), including ourselves! What a challenge to us and to our culture’s prevailing, pervasive, and arrogant sense of autonomy and self-sufficiency! This resounding “no” to human autonomy and self-help prepares for the description of appropriately directed trust in v. 5, which is followed by a description of God and God’s activity in vv. 6-9 that intends to affirm why God is worthy of trust.

Verses 5-10

The movement from vv. 1-2 to vv. 3-4 to vv. 5-10 suggests that praise is not only a liturgical act (see “sing praises” in v. 2), but also a way of living characterized by the disavowal of human autonomy (vv. 3-4) in favor of living constantly in fundamental dependence upon God (v. 5). As such, praise is the source of what makes human beings genuinely “happy” (v. 5). Thus, to “enjoy God forever,” to use the words of “The Shorter Catechism,” is to trust God and to entrust life and future to God. The NRSV’s repetition of “help” in vv. 3 and 5 (even though two different Hebrew words are involved) sharpens the contrast between trusting God and living autonomously. To trust humans, even the most powerful humans, amounts finally to “no help” (v. 3); but, “Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob” (v. 5).

It is not coincidental that vv. 5-9, especially the opening and closing lines of this section, recall Psalm 1, thus linking the Psalter’s concluding collection to the Psalter’s beginning. The Psalter’s opening word is “happy”; and Psalm 1 defines happiness as constant meditation upon—that is, attention and commitment to—God’s *torah*, “instruction” (1:2; NRSV “law”). In short, Psalm 1, like Psalm 146, commends a fundamentally God-centered existence. Also like Psalm 1, Psalm 146 features the contrast between “the righteous” (v. 8; see 1:5-6) and “the wicked” (v. 9; see 1:1, 5-6), concluding that “the way of the wicked” (1:6; 146:9) will not endure. As is clear in Psalm 1 and throughout the Psalter, wickedness is the assertion of the self over against God and God’s instruction—that is, wickedness is essentially autonomy, which is strongly disavowed by both Psalms 1 and 146.

In a culture in which happiness is probably most frequently understood as a pleasurable feeling that derives from getting, often buying, what we want, and in a culture in which autonomy is generally viewed as an unambiguous virtue and a mark of maturity, it is essential that we ponder the thoroughly God-centered definition of happiness offered by the Psalter’s first and final beatitudes (1:1; 146:5) and perhaps pursue the implications in an Advent sermon. The following quotation from a recent essay by Ellen T. Charry will help:

Contemporary culture offers us various versions of happiness. We are told that happiness is a feeling, or that happiness is a result of wealth or health, or that it can be attained by having the right product for the right moment or by perfecting one’s circumstances so as to build a buffer against ill fortune. None of these visions is the Christian vision of happiness. Instead, happiness is a life nourished by the love and goodness of God that contributes to the flourishing of creation.⁶

Notice how thoroughly God-centered is “the Christian vision of happiness” in keeping with the direction of Pss 1:1 and 146:5. What ultimately matters is not pursuing our own way or getting our own way. Rather, what matters is pursuing and

contributing to God's way on nothing short of a creation-wide scale. (See 146:6, and notice Charry's definition of happiness as "a life...that contributes to the flourishing of creation.")

As opposed to "the way of the wicked," the way of autonomous self-assertion, God's way is the focus of vv. 6-9. God is not only the creator of the world, but also the one who remains faithfully committed to the world (v. 6), especially committed to those who most need help. The common element among the categories of people mentioned in vv. 7-9b – "the oppressed," "the hungry," "the prisoners," "the blind," the "bowed down," "the righteous," "the orphan," and "the widow" – is that these people are not in a position to be able to assert themselves or to help themselves. On first glance, "the righteous" do not seem to belong in this list; but in the Psalms, "the righteous" are nearly always afflicted, oppressed, or, in some manner, opposed (see Ps 34:19). To be "righteous," in psalmic terms, is not to be sinless, but rather to live in fundamental dependence upon God and God's help – to live a thoroughly God-centered life, intent upon God's *torah*, understood as God's instruction or God's will.

In this regard, it may not be coincidental that the precisely central poetic line of Psalm 146 (vv. 6b-7a, as the poem is laid out in *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*) features the crucially important word "justice." Walter Brueggemann helpfully suggests that v. 7a articulates "the main claim for Yahweh."⁷ To put it slightly differently, "justice" is a one-word summary of God's way, what God wills for "the flourishing of creation." Not surprisingly, "justice" is a keyword in the Psalms. The pivotal collection of enthronement psalms (Psalms 93, 95-99) that explicitly identify God as "king" or assert that God reigns (93:1; 95:3; 96:10; 97:1; 98:6; 99:1) also features the word "justice." (See 96:13 and 98:9 where NRSV's "judge" is better translated "establish justice"; see also 97:2; 99:4.) Psalms 96 and 98 portray the creation responding joyfully to God's "coming" (96:13; 98:9), thus suggesting that the word "justice" does indeed summarize God's way or will for "the flourishing of creation." Then too, the remarkable Psalm 82 identifies the criterion of true divinity as the pursuit and implementation of justice (v. 3)—the setting of things right—on behalf of those in need, including "the orphan" (146:9). In short, justice is quintessentially God's way.

Because the enactment of justice is inseparable from the proper role of a sovereign, Ps 146:10 forms a natural conclusion to the psalm, as well as providing another link to the centrally important enthronement collection. In view of the inter-vening verses between the opening and closing "Praise the Lord!" the movement of Psalm 146 has made it clear that praising God is both a liturgical act and a life lived in complete orientation to God and God's way, to the point not only of enjoying the benefit of God's help, but also deriving enjoyment by conforming the self to God's way or will for the creation – contributing "to the flourishing of creation," to use Charry's words again.

In short, praise ultimately takes the form of mission. We simultaneously glorify God and enjoy God as we conform our own selves and our lives to God's way – in a word, "justice" – which has been concretely illustrated in vv. 7-9. Submitting our selves and lives to God's sovereign claim both puts us in tune with the universe and promises genuine and enduring happiness. That is good news – "a documentation of divine revelation," to use Seybold's characterization of the Psalms — and it begs to be preached!

Joy Sunday

The Third Sunday in Advent is traditionally Joy Sunday, and as suggested above, the mention of “happy” in Ps 146:5 offers an opportunity to relate proclamation to this traditional theme or emphasis, which is also present in Isa 35:1-10, the Old Testament Lesson for the day. (See Isa 35:1-2, 10.) Here too, the source of joy is thoroughly God-centered – “Here is your God” (Isa 35:4); and God’s presence is accompanied by the enactment of God’s way or will. (See Isa 35:5-6, which recall Ps 146:7-9.) Psalm 146:7-9 is also similar to Matt 11:5, a portion of the Gospel Lesson for the day. The issue in Matt 11:2-11 is whether Jesus is really the Messiah, who in the Psalter is the human agent responsible for the earthly implementation of God’s way or will. (See Psalm 72, a prayer for the king/Messiah, especially vv. 1-7, which feature the keyword “justice;” Psalm 72 is the psalm for the Second Sunday in Advent.) When the Psalter was finalized in the post-exilic era, the monarchy had disappeared; and there is evidence within the Psalter itself that the mission of the Messiah had become the responsibility of the whole people of God. (Compare, for example, Ps 2:7-9 with Ps 149:5-9 – that is, “the faithful” are now entrusted with what formerly the Messiah or “anointed” was supposed to do.) To be sure, we Christians view Jesus Messiah as the ultimate embodiment of God’s way; but we also understand ourselves to be “the body of Christ,” called to conform to God’s way revealed in Christ. Thus, insofar as Psalm 146 anticipates Matthew 11 and Jesus’s Messiahship, emphasis is again placed upon our calling or mission. The complete orientation of our selves and our lives to God and God’s way is both the ultimate form of praise and the ultimate source of human joy.

Notes

1 For a brief history of preaching on the Psalms, see James C. Howell and J. Clinton McCann, Jr., *Preaching the Psalms* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 20-32.

2 The Theology and Worship Ministry Unit, PCUSA and the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 37.

3 Klaus Seybold, *Introducing the Psalms*, trans. R. G. Dunphy (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1990), 27.

4 James L. Mays, *Preaching and Teaching the Psalms*, ed. P. D. Miller and G. M. Tucker (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 69-70.

5 For assistance in pursuing these question further, see Terence E. Fretheim, “Nature’s Praise of God in the Psalms,” *Ex Auditu* 3 (1987):16-30.

6 Ellen T. Charry, “Happy Pursuits: A Christian Vision of the Good Life,” *The Christian Century* 124/15 (July 24, 2007):33.

7 Walter Brueggemann, “Psalm 146: Psalm for the Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost,” *No Other Foundation* 8/1 (Summer 1987):28.