

Hallelujah!

Psalm 146

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Psalm 146 is set in the musical key of Advent. It is just the kind of Psalm that warms the heart during this strange holding season until we can get to Christmas. It begins with that unmistakable call to worship: "Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord O my soul! I will praise the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God all my life long!" Listen well and you hear the toe-tapping, attitude-adjusting, down-right-joyful rhythm of this musical psalm. Whether the English "Praise the Lord" or the Hebrew "Hallelujah," Psalm 146 is the perfect Advent preamble to Christmas.

In the words of Gershwin, "It ain't necessarily so." This psalm is no preamble and is not made up of sentimental theological slush. You see, they sang Psalm 146 when Fascist fires were burning in the village of Barmen. In World War II, the Third Reich had created its own church of those who called themselves "German Christians." They pledged loyalty to the Führer and to Jesus. Their religious patriotism left all other German Christians looking delinquent in faith and suspect in patriotism.

So, in late May of 1934, these embattled Lutheran and Reformed and Evangelical Christians produced "The Theological Declaration of Barmen." A part of our church's constitution, the Barmen Declaration announces ultimate allegiance to God in Christ and refutes the "German Christian," or any other ultra-nationalism and anti-Semitism. In a banner created out of this Barmen conference, a swastika is crossed out and the Christian cross rises out of it, protesting against Nazi tyranny and any effort of any leaders to take the role of God. The banner also has a flaming fire at the base of the cross, symbolizing the suffering and death which follows from defense of faith, suffering and death that some of the signers of the Barmen Declaration would experience themselves.

They sang Psalm 146 at that conference in Barmen. In the face of the hell before them, they sang "Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!" There is something about "praise the Lord" that has more substance than those pesky "born again" folks who repeat those words again and again as a pietistic mantra. There is something more substantial to "praise the Lord" than the sentimentality that often surfaces in our celebrations at this time of year. There is something, in fact, world-shattering about saying "Praise the Lord" that gets lost in all those insipid "praise" songs that clutter Christian media.

You can summarize Psalm 146 in one sentence, "Trust God, not human rulers." That's why Jews and Christians have sung this song for centuries. We sing it to remember to whom we pledge our allegiance, to remember that "In God We Trust" is more than something to stamp on our coins. We sing it in Advent to remember that we do wait for no one less than God.

According to the Psalmist, "trust in God alone" is to be stamped on our hearts, making all other trust relative and suspect. As the Psalm says, human leaders, unlike God, are *adam* in the Hebrew, that is "mortal," and will return to the *adamah*, that is "the earth." Great leaders know this.

Just days before the end of the Civil War, the city of Richmond fell, and Abraham

Lincoln came to celebrate. “No sooner had the presidential party reached the landing,” writes Pulitzer-prize winning historian, Doris Kearns Goodwin, “than Lincoln was surrounded by a small group of black laborers shouting, ‘Bless de Lord! . . . here is de great Messiah!...Glory, Hallelujah!’ First one and then several others fell on their knees, ‘Don’t kneel to me,’ Lincoln said, his voice full of emotion, ‘that is not right. You might kneel to God only, and thank him [God] for the liberty you will hereafter enjoy’” (*Team of Rivals*, p. 719).

Every Sunday when the ushers return to the table with our morning offerings, we sing a version of Psalm 146, not only a call to worship but a Doxology, a song giving glory and praise to God. We do it Sunday after Sunday, “and we never know what holy power is unleashed by such singing...we never know what human imagination is authorized by such singing,” writes Walter Brueggemann.

“This singing is our vocation, our duty, and our delight. We name this staggering name—and the world becomes open again, especially for those on whom it had closed in such deathly ways—the prisoners, the blind, the sojourner, the widow, the orphan. The world is sung open” (“Psalm 146: Psalm for the Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost,” *No Other Foundation*, p. 29).

If we’re looking for a sweet little Psalm that will sing us a lullaby while we sentimentalize this season, we had best not sing Psalm 146. When we sing this song, the world—God’s world—is “sung open.” Sing this Psalm and we catch sight of a God who cares passionately about justice, hunger, widows, orphans, the oppressed, prisoners, and about how the vulnerable on our city streets are treated.

Just when we are ready for a little season’s joy, to forget all the troubles of life for a while, this nuisance of a Psalm storms into our sanctuary shouting: “Hallelujah!” “Praise the Lord!” That chorus may sound like it belongs in an evangelical revival, but it is actually the music of a march, a revolution.

Sing this Psalm and God’s world is sung wide open. Sing this song and you may find yourself shouting over all the sorry excuses until our young women and men return home from a war that should never have been. Sing this song and you may find yourself shouting over all the catchy “get tough” clichés until we as a society spend more money educating the poor than imprisoning them. Sing this song and you may find yourself shouting over a stock host of “why not’s” until every child, legal or illegal, wealthy or poor, black or Latino or white, has access to good health care.

Sing this song and you may find yourself shouting over the standard stereotypes until the “homeless” are not a problem to be solved, but a community of men and women and children who can teach us a thing or two about “justice.” Sing this song and you may find yourself shouting over indulgent self-interest until we live in harmony with God’s creation, not because prices are high and we can’t afford the gas, but because reducing our carbon footprint is “just.”

Tucked away toward the close of 150 Psalms, Psalm 146 begins a final avalanche of “Hallelujahs.” They build upon each other until we can’t help but sing “Hallelujah.” When we sing, all the cobwebs fall from our minds, and we remember that even on our finest day, we are not God, but on our finest days, we hear God’s lullaby calling us to care about and provide for all those whom God loves.

Just when we were ready for a nice quiet Advent and a calm and peaceful Christmas, here comes Psalm 146.

Hallelujah! Praise the Lord!