

Preaching the Lenten Texts

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It may be a risk worth taking. Preaching a Lenten series on the Psalms, that is. Some might see that as a form of penance, but the Psalter is one of the most widely read and loved books of the Bible, filled with gifts of wisdom and authenticity. The Psalms meet us where we are and lead us forward, where we need to be. They are filled with real faith, unrefined honesty, raw emotion, eager hopefulness, blank despair, and robust experience of life with God. While we may not be close to the specific situation that inspired a particular psalm, a wealth of modern experiences in life gives rise to expressions similar to those we find in the Psalms. Furthermore, they have functional fluidity; other more traditional Lenten texts connect with Psalms easily.

Lent is a season of change. With the Holy Spirit as our guide, we change our minds, habits, perspectives, faith practices, focus, and desires. This year, we are invited to change our habits and let God's word found in the Psalms direct our Lenten Journey. Martin Luther called the Psalms "the little Bible," due to the scope of riches found in this brief, poetic prose. John Calvin described the Psalter as "the mirror of the soul," noting that the impressive quality of the Psalms is not as much their poetic splendor, but the expression of every experience and emotion within us. We find ourselves in the Psalms; they provide mirrors for our lives. They are records of our response to God, even as they are God's profound word to humanity.

First Sunday in Lent

Deuteronomy 26:1-11; *Psalms* 91:1-2, 9-16; Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13

As the season of Lent approaches each year, my daughter inevitably sparks a feisty family conversation. After conferring with her devoutly Roman Catholic friends from the neighborhood, she invariably bursts into the house on an evening approaching Ash Wednesday and asks, "What are you all giving up for Lent this year?"

"I'm not giving up anything," was my shocked response the first year this happened. "But I thought you love Jesus. I thought you were a minister!" she protested. Abandoning dinner preparations and calling my husband for back-up, the two of us double-teamed our eight-year-old and attempted to explain that the practice of fasting or giving up things for Lent is not really required. After all, I argued, it's much better to do something life-giving during Lent. Don't give something up. Add something good to your life that makes you a more faithful follower of Christ. Offer overdue forgiveness. Make a new friend. Pray or study the Bible with renewed commitment. Learn a new spiritual discipline. Volunteer. Focus on extreme kindness to someone who needs it. Worship more often.

"I'm not eating meat," she announced just as the smoke detector went off, ironically signaling that we were not having fajitas for dinner after all.

We had been warned that preacher's kids tend to stir up trouble. Furthermore, we were clear on who calls the shots in our household, and it was (and is) not the kid. So, we were not about to let our dearly beloved child focus Lent on limits, whether they

be limits on food, internet time, spending, complaining, or anything else.

Nevertheless, turning to Psalm 91 on the first Sunday in Lent, I run straight into my limits. The psalm makes remarkable promises of deliverance and protection, offering comprehensive coverage that tests the limits of my patience and belief. After all, many devout people know the heartbreak of betrayal, the pain of loss, or the menace of a fatal disease. How can we then say, “no evil shall befall you, no scourge come near your tent” (v. 10)? In speaking about this psalm, English clergyman Leslie D. Weatherhead argues, “It just is not true.”¹

Yet, a closer reading of Psalm 91 reveals that it is those “who live in the shelter of the Most High, who abide in the shadow of the Almighty” (v. 1) who will know God as a refuge and fortress. Those “who have made the Lord [their] refuge, the Most High [their] dwelling place” (v. 9) will have “no evil befall [them], no scourge come near [their] tent” (v. 10).

Therein lies the biggest limit of all. Who among us has truly made God their refuge? It’s often easier to cling to the safety found in competency, wealth, health, friends, busyness, or work. Who among us lives in the shadow of the Almighty (v. 1), making the Most High their dwelling place (v. 9)? Many of us would like to and are able to do so at times. We just can’t do it all the time. It is difficult to trust God perfectly, wholly, and persistently. Furthermore, there is only one person who has ever been able to fully do so: Jesus Christ.

Lent is a time to recognize our limits. In the midst of a culture that teaches that we can do anything or be anyone, Lent is a season to make peace with our limits of time, ability, character, or belief. Limits teach us to prioritize. They invite us to come to terms with our fears. They insist that we master time management. Taught by society to let nothing stop us, limits teach that saying “no” is not rude, but honest, sensible, and best for all. Taught to be self-sufficient, limits teach us to partner and to treasure those who offer collegiality, camaraderie, or friendship. Taught to deny weakness, limits remind that we’re not self-sufficient, autonomous beings, able to flourish on our own. Limits ask us to relinquish the pretense of being perfect, having it altogether, and being worthy of much of the grace we have received. During Lent, we are asked to offer God not our goodness, but our honesty; we are invited to lay down real, solid sin. In the assurance that we are loved fully, forgiven freely, and delivered from the enemy named sin, we face our personal limitations which scare us into countless hiding places. During this season, we own our limits and begin to appreciate the gifts they offer.

Our self-indulgent, self-flattering age may find this strange, but limits can be as life-giving as our gifts. We are led to truth and abundant life by our weaknesses as well as our strengths. When we know ourselves as flawed and graced, then we grasp how extraordinary it is that God has come to us and delivered us in the person of Jesus Christ.

The extravagant promises of Psalm 91 call for an equally extravagant faith, one that I hope the Holy Spirit will continue helping us all develop and discover. Yet, perhaps this is the year to take on a Lenten discipline of fasting. Yes, we should also plan to laugh, pray, and worship this season; however, a discipline of giving up something can remind us of our limits, the gifts that accepting them brings, and the extraordinary news that the limits which keep us from God have been overcome in Jesus Christ.

The One who is without limits became limited so that we might be free of all that

distorts our humanity. Because of this, whether we acknowledge it or not, we live in the “shelter of the most high” and can know God as our refuge, fortress and salvation.

Second Sunday in Lent

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; *Psalms* 27; Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-35

In a world teeming with broken relationships, personal disappointment, public scandals, political games, cultural disrespect, and ongoing terrorist threat, trust is difficult to extend – even to God. After all, even the faithful know bitter disappointment and crushing pain. We are familiar with people maneuvering against us (v. 2, 3, 6, 12). God’s own even know the feeling of abandonment or being “turned away” (v. 9) by God. Consequently, how can we or anyone call God “light” and “salvation”? What makes the psalmist believe in seeing “the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living” (v. 13)? Does God deliver people from evil or hide people “in his shelter in the day of trouble” (v. 5)?

As Christians sit together in diverse seasons of life, Psalm 27 uniquely speaks to the person who has faced difficulty and yet knows the easing of initial pain. While perhaps callous for one in the throes of grief and insufficiently challenging for someone comfortable to the point of needing reminder that their hope is in God and not self, Psalm 27 offers camaraderie and subtle guidance to someone scared or uncertain about the future. Whether this person is surviving cancer, navigating a 12-step recovery program and still tempted by old adversaries and unsure of his long term fortitude, or is a soldier reintegrating into civilian life but still dueling her post traumatic stress disorder demons, Psalm 27 maintains gritty honesty as it dances back and forth between fear and trust.

On the one hand, the psalmist addresses God as “light,” “salvation,” and “stronghold.” God “hides” or protects the psalmist in times of trouble. God “teaches” and “leads” in the ways of right living. Even in times of trouble, affirms the psalmist, God is worth the wait. Psalm 27 is a breath-taking affirmation of faith and trust in God, even in the face of dangerous enemies.

On the other hand, the questions “Whom shall I fear?” and “Of whom shall I be afraid?” may not be rhetorical. Verse 2 names “evildoers,” “adversaries,” and “foes,” while verse 3 identifies entire armies or groups of people as arrayed against the psalmist, ready to fight. By verse 7, the bravado of these initial verses is gone, and the psalmist pleads with God: “Hear me...when I cry aloud” (v. 7). The psalmist implores God: “Answer me!” (v. 7), “Do not hide your face from me...do not turn your servant away in anger...do not cast me off, do not forsake me...” (v. 9), and “do not give me up” (v. 12). The tension between verses 1 and 12 feels palpable. Real fear lives alongside honest faith. *Bona fide* doubt holds hands with genuine trust. In this psalm, as in life, both are unavoidable.

Perhaps unexpectedly, both are also essential. Vigorous faith, as well as animated doubt, both insist that God be taken seriously, asked real questions, and depended upon in tangible ways. Examined doubts refine our understanding and illuminate our experience of God as we filter our beliefs, sifting wishful thinking about the God we want from the challenging wisdom of the God who is.

Thus, though an uncomfortable part of Lenten discipline, we follow Psalm 27’s lead, holding fear and faith, doubt and trust together. We form communities where

people are allowed and taught to talk honestly. In response to culture's deep and pronounced needs for connectivity and authenticity, we offer safe space, even to people whose lives, view of the world, or clothing style may not match our own.

In many churches, we spend tremendous time debating interesting questions, "believing" or "not believing" that God engages personal or political matters, for example, "believing" or "not believing" that God rescues and hides people from enemies. Yet, faith is not simply about "believing" or "not believing." It is not assent to a specific supposition; at its best, it is not about doctrine at all. It is about the truth of what we have known. The life of faith is grounded in experience; it is about the real mystery, awe, pain, and grace that we know. As such, the faithful live at the intersection of religious ideas and real life, humbly bringing soaring trust, persistent doubt, and everything in between into conversation with one another, scripture, church tradition, the chorus of witnesses, and the Holy Spirit who works in and through all. In this busy age of anxiety, as in the contemplative days of Lent, we teach and provide opportunity for people to do what the psalmist is doing in Psalm 27: sharing experience of God (v. 1-6, 13-14) and praying raw prayer that may not seem respectful or theologically correct, but is honest (v. 7-12). Learning to hold doubt and faith together takes patience, which is why the last verse of the Psalm holds all fourteen verses together. Patient seeking, patient searching, patient development of spiritual practices that make both faith and doubt meaningful—give us the time and skills needed to navigate pain, learn lessons, gain perspective, or perhaps even experience the world differently.

After all, those with the courage and skills to gaze deeply at doubt, faith, and all of life generally have "eyes to see and ears to hear" that which we easily miss. They see differently, turning a corner and seeing abundance before scarcity. They reach a milestone and recognize grace before loss. Rejecting the self-fulfilling belief that we live in a world based on fear, scarcity, and competition, they notice what is easily overlooked and recognize what they are given each day. They do not gloss over real poverty (material, intellectual, spiritual or emotional), nor do they minimize pain or injustice. They know the power of trust and the benefits of doubt in bringing out the best in others and in them. Furthermore, based on who they keep discovering God to be, they too proclaim the word we all need to hear: "The Lord is my light and salvation...the Lord is the stronghold of my life."

Third Sunday in Lent

Isaiah 55:1-9; *Psalm* 63:1-8; I Corinthians 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9

Barbara Cawthorne Crafton says, in "Living Tent," that we didn't know the word. "We didn't even know what moderation was. What it felt like. We didn't just work; we inhaled our jobs, sucked them in, *became* them. Stayed late, brought work home – it was never enough, though, no matter how much time we put in."²

We didn't just shop; we maxed out our credit limits. We shopped for new clothes, though we didn't have any more space in our closets. We came home with new toys, not wanting the kids to be without. We bought more groceries while the food in the refrigerator spoiled. We bought houses with double height entryways, chef's kitchen, oversize garages, master suites or home theatres where, on our big screens, we cheered on the biggest loser (of weight, that is) or watched the audaciously proportioned Super

Bowl.

"We didn't just eat; we stuffed ourselves."³ We didn't just exercise; we became week-end warriors. Christmas was as big as we could afford. Our waistbands became even bigger. Michael Jackson encouraged "Don't Stop 'til You Get Enough," but we never had enough. Except when it came to God. We never let our appetite for God get out of control. In fact, in the midst of this propensity toward size, our appetite for God stayed paltry.

But what about now? We may be committed to spending less and saving more. We may eat more simply, drive older cars, and wear the same clothes for several years. We may work more reasonable hours; in the face of excess, the call for moderation is crystal clear. But is moderation any more Christian than excess?

The Christian witness isn't toward moderation, but toward properly ordered desires. The faithful life does not demand restraint in all things, but restraint in the right things. Faithfully following Jesus means learning to passionately love and spend our lives on the right things. The question asked by Psalm 63 as well as the entire season of Lent is: Are we zealously loving what is best?

While we may energetically desire a job, professional recognition, a hybrid vehicle, home renovation, or the latest I-Phone, do we yearn for God with similar zest? While we may steadily save for retirement or vacation, do we seek God with the same regularity, intensity, and focus? Do we hunger for God so deeply it is as if our stomach growls? Do we love God with the kind of spontaneous enthusiasm that we might bring to one of our other loves: March Madness, jazz, gardening, NASCAR, travel, or cooking with vine ripe tomatoes and pungent basil fresh from the garden? Our gusto for God can be remarkably small, particularly when contrasted with the joy and delight in God that we discover in the psalms.

In Psalm 63, the psalmist is not simply interested in or respectful of God; instead, the psalmist craves God like a coffee drinker craves the first morning cup. In fact, dire thirst symbolizes the need in verse 1; hunger represents the need in verse 5. The longing for God is so intense, it is experienced physically.

Alongside this profound longing, Psalm 63 exudes utter rapt joy. Like a young child exhilarated at riding her first bicycle down a steep hill, the psalmist delights in God's presence: "Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips...praise you (v. 3) ...I will bless you as long as I live; I...lift up my hands and call on your name. My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast (v. 4-5a) ...You have been my help....I sing for joy (v. 7)....My soul clings to you" (v. 8a). Throughout Psalm 63:1-8, desire for God is clear. If verses 9-11 are included, this gusto for God is even more breathtaking when it is revealed not as naively flip, but as sustained, profound joy that endures threat and danger. Despite the real enemies, opposition, and pain described in 63:9-11, the psalmist is "lost in wonder, love, and praise."⁴

This psalm offers a vision of the faithful life as hungering and thirsting for God, ultimately feasting on God's presence. Centuries later, Jesus similarly advocates big passion for God: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment" (Matthew 22:37-38). The example of faith demonstrated in Psalm 63 invites us not to measure ourselves based on our relationship to moderation, on how well we care for others, our gifts, our responsibilities, or by anything other than what goes on in our deepest being. In the midst of a world filled with competition for our affections,

allegiance, energy, and love, Psalm 63 challenges the faithful to cultivate gusto for God. The faithful develop their hearts, honing their desires until we find, with St. Augustine (354-430), that “our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee.”

Unfortunately, as seen in soaring addiction rates, disordered desire is the norm. Sometimes we want wrong things. More often, we want good things in bad ways. We want some things too much (as in the case of most addictions), or we desire other things too little. Savoring Psalm 63 centers the soul. It directs desire. If there’s anything we need more of in our XXL society, it is more joy and pleasure in God. Loving God more than life (v. 3) still feels foreign to most of us; our desire for God has rarely been so full-bodied and comprehensive that it feels like hunger or thirst. Instead, overwhelmed or embarrassed by the religious passions of some people, we may be tempted to downplay the importance of cultivating zeal for God. Alternatively, gusto for God that is as natural and spontaneous as our enjoyment of life’s other loves may seem unrealistic, and we may not know how to begin the Lenten discipline of honing and healing our wounded desires or, quite honestly, whether we want them healed at all.

Fortunately, size is not central with God. For those who worry they are not good enough or who feel isolated on the outskirts of the “real” Christian community, Psalm 63 invites identifying and starting with whatever longing we do have. Whether we genuinely desire to know and enjoy God more, whether we want to desire such a thing, or whether we simply know discontent, restlessness, boredom, or a breaking point, God takes the small and changes the world with it. God did it in choosing a small nation of Hebrew people to be his own. God did it when sending a vulnerable baby to forever change the world. God did it in healing all of wounded creation through the ignominy of a common, crude cross. Like the proverbial mustard seed, God works with what is (even if it is nothing more than the smallest of desires), and changes the world with it. Even so, the Holy One works with whatever desire for God we do have and helps us cultivate and grow it, until it too turns into a feast of praise and joy. After all, the whole time we are seeking and thirsting for God, we’re held in God’s hand (v. 8).

Fourth Sunday in Lent

Joshua 5:9-12; *Psalm 32*; II Corinthians 5:16-12; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Happiness is high on people’s list of priorities. In fact, hunger for happiness drives much of our lives. The ambitions we pursue, the homes we live in, the relationships we engage, the professions we enter, the hobbies we love, the clothes we wear, the food we eat, and even the way we observe Lent reflect individual belief about what brings fulfillment and happiness. Noting the universality of this desire, the Dalai Lama observes:

Indeed, the more I see of the world, the clearer it becomes that no matter what our situation... rich or poor, educated or not, of one race, gender, religion or another, we all desire to be happy....It is in our nature. Our every intended action, in a sense our whole life—how we choose to live it within the context of the limitations imposed by our circumstances—can be seen as our answer to the great question which confronts us all: “How am I to be happy?”⁵

In Psalm 32, happiness comes from being forgiven. It comes not from being important, accomplished, organized, optimistic, or busy. Instead, being happy is a matter of being righteous, and according to Psalm 32, righteousness is not a matter of being sinless. It is about the ego bruising-work of Lent: acknowledging sin, accepting forgiveness, vigilantly attending God's teachings, trusting God more than self and, then, being happy in the One who steers us toward paths of utter fulfillment.

Undoubtedly, this work is difficult. The confession stage alone is a lonely and tempting place. Culturally, it is popular to assign blame to others and not assume responsibility ourselves. Sin is accepted readily and dismissed as unproblematic. Alternatively, telling the truth and nothing but the truth about our lives leaves others feeling like lone sinners surrounded by saints. Eventually, they withdraw from community and even from God. Still others stay frozen in a state of perpetual horror at their sin and magnify its importance. Rehearsing their crime repeatedly, as if they alone are guilty of such a thing, they berate themselves repeatedly and ask for forgiveness without repenting because, like rubberneckers staring at a car accident, they are unable to pull their gaze from their sin toward God and the open road of sanctified possibilities lying ahead.

Some sin may be small but haunting, as it is never released, but instead hauled everywhere. Much like Augustine's ongoing grief at stealing pears from a neighbor's tree when he was 16 years old⁶ or like a friend's ongoing remorse at having intentionally embarrassed an awkward grade school classmate, some build a past trespass into a paradigmatic representation of the host of failure and sin characteristic of their lives. However, focusing on fault and magnifying its importance is not confession but megalomania, as if we know better than God does that we are undeserving. It narcissistically keeps the focus on our actions, when what God has done and continues to do is far more important. It involves refusing forgiveness and features failure to follow God's lead into fresh ways of living.

Thus, though Psalm 32 is considered the second of the traditional penitential psalms, even this Psalm does not stop with confession, but pushes past the temptation to dwell on one's crimes into the essential next steps taken by the righteous. Notably, after 32:6, there is no more mention of fierce faults or forgiven foibles. Instead, the happy acknowledge sin (v. 5-6), accept forgiveness (v. 7), attend God's instruction (v. 8-9), accentuate and trust God more than self (v. 10), and act glad in God (v. 11). Psalm 32 digs beyond the psychologically therapeutic benefits of confession and is about personal change that places God alone at the center of our lives, without rival.

The starting point, however, is giving up foolish avoidance of the topic of sin and breaching the silence between self and God. After all, when we keep silent, the consequences are dire. The psalmist had his strength dry up and wither away like shriveled grass browning in the heat of the summer sun. His mouth kept silent, so his body spoke. It wasted away. Alternatively, we may exhibit extra pounds, knots in our back, higher blood pressure, shorter temper, or insomnia, but the result is the same: silence about sin makes us sick.

When the only confession we engage involves prayers that lack specificity, self-examination, and sorrow, there is no bruising of our ego, but neither is there transformation or inner healing. When we let fear or pride infest our lives, we make ourselves at home with distorted views of the nature of humanity and Christian community. At its deepest core, to be human is not to be a sinner, but to be loved. To be righteous is

not to be sinless, but to be forgiven and freed. To be in Christian community is not to downplay brokenness, but to accept it and be transformed by the One who healed brokenness on the cross and whose name is and always has been Love.

The Christian faith and even the season of Lent is about entering into a way of life that answers the deep human desire for happiness. The entire study of Christian morality and what it looks like to faithfully follow Christ is best understood as “training in happiness,”⁷ an ongoing initiation into the desires, attitudes, habits, and practices that make for a happy and good life. We may be accustomed to understanding confession, let alone morality or the penitential season of Lent, as life-sapping law, obligation, or rule. However, the witness and instruction of Psalm 32 announces that happiness comes when we are made right with God and engaged in practices such as confession that provide basic building blocks upon which this fundamental friendship flourishes.

5th Sunday in Lent

Isaiah 43:16-12; *Psalm 126*; Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8

“Restore our fortunes, O Lord” (v. 4). While the language was certainly different, we have prayed this prayer. Every one of us who has lost a meaningful relationship that we want back has uttered similar words. Each of us who has been unemployed or financially unstable knows of longing for an easier time. We who have been sick need our health returned. We who live in a broken home, abusive relationship, racist environment, or other literal or figurative prison yearn for freedom. We who know the devastation of a flood, hurricane, drought, or other natural disaster crave security, not to mention a better situation. Pain, needs, and ongoing problems prompt us to pray for what we have already experienced. “Restore our fortunes, O Lord...may those who go out weeping...come home with shouts of joy...” (v. 4, 6). May our mouths be filled with laughter (v. 2).

It is during times of pain that we often look nostalgically back to happier days, and even in this psalm, we witness the people of Israel heralding the good ‘ole days. Remembering their long anticipated return to Jerusalem (Zion), they talk of their dreams coming true, their land, livelihoods, and community being returned, their eyes sparkling with joy, and their mouths being filled with laughter (v. 1-3). Not mentioning the challenges of return from exile, they simply celebrate how wonderful life was, how easily laughter spilled into the air.

Some might label this as denial, as a pollyanna attitude, or as whistling in the dark; yet, the past gives hope. We claim God’s past presence and action in our lives and in the lives of others, looking to it as a foundation upon which we continue to affirm God’s ability and will to deliver us from our present circumstances. We offer subversive doxology. We continue to praise God from whom all blessings flow because we believe in God’s power to make new more than we believe in the world’s power to keep status quo. Even in the midst of a heart-breaking, scar-making present, we defiantly etch out moments to praise God because we believe in God’s goodness more than the world’s badness. In the face of difficult and dangerous days that popular culture teaches will always be with us, we witness to a new day. Grounded in the past and looking toward the future, we claim that joy reflects wisdom and that hope is an authentic stance. We spend more time looking at God and his kingdom than at a mirror.

Suffering is an inescapable part of life. In the video for REM's hit song entitled "Everybody Hurts," the band is stuck in a traffic jam. Filmed along I-10 in San Antonio, Texas, the video shows people in other cars, also trapped in traffic. The thoughts of these despondent drivers and passengers appear on screen in the form of subtitles, and eventually Psalm 126:5 flashes on the screen: "Those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy." The point is as clear as the title of the song. Everybody hurts sometimes.

Those of us following a Savior with his face set stone solidly toward Jerusalem, gritting his teeth and facing squarely what lies ahead already understand this. Moreover, suffering not from injustice or the world's whimsy, but suffering as a by-product of relationship with God is a sign of faithfulness, a mark of discipleship. Christ's life is a demand. Taking up our cross is requirement. We are called to die for him as he died for us. We are to be followers, not admirers. As Soren Kierkegaard once wrote, "When there is no danger, when there is a dead calm, when everything is favorable to our Christianity, then it is all too easy to confuse an admirer with a follower.... The admirer can be under the delusion that the position he takes is the true one, when all he is doing is playing it safe."⁸

There are many reasons we pray to God, saying, "Restore our fortunes." Glorious expectations are not met. Injustice tears our lives. As our Lenten journey continues, it is important to ask: When has God done great things for you? What do you currently need from God? What currently brings you pain? Is it suffering born of discipleship, disaster, or injustice? What does your faith ask of you right now? To what degree are you following Christ and to what degree are you simply admiring him?

As Psalm 126 boldly affirms, more dependable than suffering is God's deliverance. In trouble as in tranquility, in the storm as in the calm, God is with us and God's world will be.

Passion/Palm Sunday

Luke 19:28-40; *Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29*; Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 31:9-16; Philippians 2:5-11; Luke 22:14-23:56 or Luke 23:1-49

Like an ancient Passover parade, Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem was filled with heady excitement. People of all walks of life converged on the city in a dynamic swirl of variety and color, exuberantly spreading their cloaks on the ground in front of Jesus as a symbol of honor. Luke reports that "the whole multitude of disciples began to praise God joyfully" (v. 37). From the sides of the road, the crowd cheered: "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!" Some leaders were displeased and asked Jesus to order his disciples to stop, but Jesus answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out" (v. 40).

The stones would shout? Why? (We'll save that "how" question for later.)

Similarly, in what is only one of many psalms of thanksgiving and praise, the psalmist of Psalm 118 proclaims, "O give thanks to the Lord...(v.1). Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord...(v. 26). You are my God, and I will give thanks to you; you are my God, I will extol you" (v. 28). Why is this show of support, excitement, and admiration important?

The title of the book of Psalms in Hebrew is a word which means praises, and many of the psalms begin and end with a call for people to praise God. Furthermore, through-

out the scriptures, the “end times,” “renewed creation,” or “heaven” is depicted as a time and place when believers from every nation ceaselessly praise and worship God. Unending praise is our purpose and destiny.

Why does God need praise? Why do we have a historic chorus of witnesses incessantly reminding us to praise God? And why, incidentally, does their praise of God so often consist of telling other people to praise God as well?

Gratitude to God, reverence, and obedience are things we can understand, and at the beginning of Holy Week, we easily offer them to God. But why is perpetual eulogy important? After all, we easily tire of the person who continually needs reminder and assurance of her intelligence, his sense of humor, or her importance.

So, what’s going on here? Praise is asked of us four times in the first four verses of Psalm 118, is asked again in the last verse, and it is offered in each of the remaining verses of this week’s lectionary reading of the Psalter. More broadly, exhortation to praise God is a more dominant feature of the Book of Psalms than prayers for help. So, praise sounds like a good idea, but why the urgency, and why should it begin Holy Week?

My daughter Logan is a smart, creative red head who is rapidly developing a personal sense of style, greater confidence, and more curiosity. This played out in a new way over the summer when we were touring Colonial Williamsburg. Our tour guide asked the 40 of us gathered for the tour if we knew when Great Britain first attempted to tax the colonies for revenue. No one answered, until Logan tentatively raised her hand and said, “My school in Georgia told us it was the Stamp Act in 1765. A month later the House of Burgess said it was illegal.” The tour guide looked impressed and confirmed that she was right.

I was stunned. Logan does not speak in front of people. She’s the shy child who will not speak in class. However, she was not only speaking, but she was informing a group of strangers. When she raised her hand and quietly answered the follow-up question and then asked a great question of her own, I glanced at my husband, trying to suppress a triumphant smile. However, I was proud.

I was happy that she spoke up. She was working past a fear. I was also thrilled that she knew her American history. My husband and I could not wait to tell our parents, and we called them that night, proudly relaying the story, first to one grandparent and then to the other. We even told it in front of Logan in order to build her up.

Have you ever noticed that delight spontaneously overflows into praise? Unless something like self-consciousness or concern for others brings that praise into check, we talk about the things we enjoy. In fact, the world rings with admiration: music fans praising their favorite group, sports fans raving about their team, food enthusiasts commending their favorite restaurants, and patriots paying tribute to their country. There is praise of weather, wines, art, actors, ideas, flowers, beaches, mountains, motors, homes, cars, leaders, rare coins, rare collections, technology, sometimes even politicians or ministers.

Praise doesn’t even stop in the face of things that fail to be praiseworthy. How many times have we heard a poor presentation, poem, song, recital, or sermon praised? And, just as spontaneously as we launch into praising what we value, many of us also spontaneously urge those around us to join us in praising that which we enjoy: Isn’t she gorgeous? Isn’t he handsome? Wasn’t that amazing? Or, in my case, “Hey! Guess what Logan did?”

Unless we deliberately limit ourselves, we too spontaneously urge others to join us in praising that which we enjoy. How many times have you heard a minister stand up and compliment the choir or praise a volunteer? Why not just pat them on the back later? Why urge the rest of the congregation to also express their appreciation or admiration?

It is because praise completes the enjoyment. It is not out of vanity that those in love continue to compliment one another; the delight is incomplete until it is expressed. It is frustrating to have discovered a new author and not to be able to tell anyone how good she is; to come suddenly, at the turn of the road, upon some amazing view and then to have to keep silent because the people with you care for it no more than for the empty McDonald's bag in the ditch; to hear a good joke and find no one to share it with. Praise completes the enjoyment.⁹

We praise. We worship. We glorify. Anthropologists have noted that worship is a universal urge, seemingly hard-wired into the very fiber of our being. Praise is not created to be part of our life; it *is* our life.

Orel Herschiser was an unbelievable baseball pitcher who pitched an amazing 1998 season for the Los Angeles Dodgers. Following a complete game shutout in August, he did not allow his opponents to score an earned run in 59 consecutive innings.

When the Dodgers faced the New York Mets in the National League playoffs, Orel dominated hitters, leading the Dodgers to victory by pitching more than 24 innings. In the final game of the playoffs, he pitched a complete game shut-out and ended the season, having won the Cy Young Award and two MVP awards, one for the National League play-offs and the other for the World Series.

In one of the final games of the playoffs, the TV cameras zoomed in and caught Orel in the dugout between innings softly singing to himself. Unable to make out the tune, the announcers merely commented that Orel's record certainly gave him something to sing about. A few days later when Orel appeared on Johnny Carson's "Tonight Show," Johnny asked him what song he had been singing during the game and if Orel would sing it right then and there.

The audience egged him on and roared their approval over Orel's embarrassed reluctance. Finally, on national TV, Orel Herschiser softly sang the tune that he had been singing while competing in the World Series:

Praise God from whom all blessings flow
Praise Him all creatures here below.
Praise Him above ye heavenly host,
Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost.

"What is man's chief end?" asks the first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism.

"Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever," the secret being that these are the same thing. To fully enjoy God is to fully glorify and praise, and in creating us to glorify God in all things, God is simply inviting us to enjoy Him forever. This is the gift Jesus came to bring, and it is the reason that even the stones would shout praises.

Notes

1. Leslie D. Weatherhead, *Key Next Door* (New York: Abingdon, 1060), 103.
2. Barbara Cawthorne Crafton, "Living Lent," in *Bread and Wine: Readings for Lent and Easter* (Farmington, PA: The Plough Publishing House, 2003), 15.
3. Ibid.
4. Charles Wesley, "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling," 1747, in *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1978) #315.
5. Dalai Lama, *Ethics for the New Millennium* (New York: Riverside Books, 1999), 4.
6. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin Books, 1961), 49.
7. Paul Wadell, *Happiness and the Christian Moral Life* (Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield, 2008) 47.
8. Søren Kierkegaard, "Followers, not Admirers," in *Bread and Wine: Readings for Lent and Easter* (Farmington, PA: The Plough Publishing House, 2003), 59.
9. This paragraph is an updated rendering of a paragraph by C. S. Lewis, which has inspired this essay. C. S. Lewis, *Reflections of the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and company, 1958), 95.