

instead celebrate God in our worship, singing and praying? What does worshipping with gladness look like? Do you consider praise to God your duty and delight? How does worship help you trust and give thanks to God?

Prayer: For your steadfast love that endures forever, I will shout praises to you, O Lord! Amen.

Sermon Notes



Series: Long Story Short

Sermon: The Writings

Psalm 119: 105-112

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. I have sworn an oath and confirmed it, to observe your righteous ordinances. I am severely afflicted; give me life, O Lord, according to your word. Accept my offerings of praise, O Lord, and teach me your ordinances. I hold my life in my hand continually, but I do not forget your law. The wicked have laid a snare for me, but I do not stray from your precepts. Your decrees are my heritage they are the joy of my heart. I incline my heart to perform your statutes forever, to the end.

Monday: Read Ecclesiastes 1-2:26

Ecclesiastes (or *Qohelet* – the name given to the author) just barely got into the Bible by the skin of its teeth. After all, it’s a brutally honest writing about the vanity (better translated “vapor”) of human existence. “*What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun.*” Don’t we all feel that way sometimes? It’s always the same old thing. Nothing ever really gets settled. Nothing will ever be just right. And for what? Just so that we can get up and do it all again? What a waste of breath! Several times throughout Ecclesiastes, Qohelet proclaims that, when confronted with the apparent meaninglessness of life, the best we can do is enjoy ourselves — take joy in eating, drinking, even in our work. A particular joy is to be found in companionship with one another; two are better than one, he writes, “*For if they fall, one will lift up the other*” (4:9-10). He reminds us that we are to see enjoyment in play, in work, and in relationships as gifts from God because enjoyment comes “*from the hand of God*” (2:24). In the midst of a life that seems monotonous, unsatisfying, and sorrowful, out of the corners of our eyes we can see small glimmers of God’s grace. Despair has a way of casting a veil over our eyes, blinding us to the brilliance of God’s love. But if we see momentary joys as what they are, as small pinpricks of light in the veil, we live not in despair over meaninglessness but in hope for the day when that light shines brilliantly on all. What do you think about Qohelet’s brutally honest reflections about the vapor of life? Is his voice one of refreshing honesty to which you can relate? How does finding joy amidst the demands and tedium of life help you move forward? Where do you see pinpricks of God’s grace in your day to day life?

Prayer: In the vapor of life, O God, may I recognize glimmers of your love and light. Amen.

Tuesday: Read Proverbs 8

Wisdom is a watcher of humanity and a lover of people – she “*delights in the human race.*” She stands on the busy market square and cries out to all who pass by, “*gain insight...acquire intelligence...seek knowledge and understanding...hear my instruction.*” As I read this passage, I see a common thread: WISDOM and LIFE. “*Whoever finds me, finds life,*” says Wisdom. Perhaps it is that the way of wisdom leads to life, to *real* life: to the vital, life-giving, Spirit-filled lives we all long for. When we make wisdom-rooted decisions our actions become life-giving to all around us. In wisdom we support and nourish the spirit-filled life in ourselves, and then the community, and then the world. Wisdom touches, in widening circles, our neighborhoods and city streets, daring to see God’s face in neighbor and stranger and nurturing it, cherishing it, helping it thrive. Wisdom calls us not out of our lives, but deeper into them: deeper into our relationships, deeper into our communities and neighborhoods, deeper into the mysteries of creation itself so that God’s justice and righteousness may flow through our lives. Where do you see Wisdom calling in your life? In your community? In creation? How has Wisdom called you deeper into relationships of justice and service? How does Wisdom lead you, and others, to *real* life?

Prayer: Creating God, give us hearts that respond to the cries of Wisdom and grant that we may find ourselves nourished, enriched, full of life, and ready to serve. Amen.

Wednesday: Read Job 23

Poet Elizabeth Alexander suggests that reading and writing poetry are ways to get at hard and true things that allow poet and reader to formulate and ask questions. Perhaps this is the reason poetry is the primary style in the Book of Job. Job has looked everywhere and has found no one to comfort him or relieve his despair. God has not responded in any way to Job’s demand for answers. But Job is still at it, asking and searching. Why doesn’t he just give up or “*curse God and die*”? What is it that makes him persist in his quest for a divine response? Alexander says, “the act of asking real questions in poems is a form of spiritual practice.” Job continues to talk to God as a way of maintaining a connection, even when he doesn’t feel one. Questions always leave open the possibility for a dialogue. So what does Job want from God? He wants to know what all of us want to know at certain points in our lives: *Where is God in all of this? Why has all of this happened to me? After all, I played by the rules, I did the right things, I have been a good person. You, God, have not played fair. What’s going on? I need to know!* When others have suggested that asking questions is a faithless act, Job persists as an incredible model of faith! Job shows us that saying hard and true things and asking real questions is part of being in relationship with God. They keep the lines of communication open when every other avenue seems closed off. What hard questions do you have for God? Does the idea that asking real questions is a spiritual practice offer you comfort? When it seems like all is lost, does knowing that Job refuses to give up offer you hope?

Prayer: Sometimes I do wonder where you are in all of life’s difficulty, O God. Help me to see my questions as a sign of my continuing faith. Amen.

Thursday: Read Song of Songs (Song of Solomon) 2:8-17

When I was a teenager, I was struck by one particular song by The Police. It could have been the catchy tune, or that it played repeatedly on the radio. In reality it was because I was head over heels in love with a guy and the lyrics said what I was feeling: “Every little thing [he] does is magic; Everything [he] do just turns me on.” When I explained these feelings to my mother, she advised me to focus on more “holy things.” Thank God for my grandmother! She reminded me (and my mother) that feelings of physical attraction *are* holy. She turned in her Bible to a book (sadly) seldom mentioned in church – The Song of Songs — a writing unique in the scriptures for its passionate lyrics extolling physical love. This holy poem is a lovely reminder that our physical bodies are beautiful and beloved, and that loving relationships occur within, and not in spite of, human bodies. The reading begins with the woman’s delight over the way the man moves, then she exclaims over the way he stands still and looks out the window; she is consumed with *every little thing he does!* In Song of Songs, the woman and man are in harmony with one another and with the natural world; the brokenness of relationships between humans and between humans and the earth is healed. The Song celebrates faithful human love. For that reason alone, it deserves a place in scripture. In a culture saturated with sexual images but sorely lacking in prominent examples of lifelong faithful love, Song of Songs celebrates love that is marked by mutuality and fidelity. How do you understand physical love to be an expression of God’s desire for humanity? Why do you think the church shies away from this book? How can we grow in our understanding of embodied faith through reading this Song?

Prayer: Thank you, O God, for creating humanity to love – body and soul. Amen.

Friday: Read Psalm 22

Many Christians think that “complaining in faith” is a contradiction in terms. Too often I hear people say, “It’s not faithful to be angry at God.” When I hear this, I always point toward the Psalms! Nearly one-third of the 150 psalms are laments. Lament language can help individuals and the church speak the truth about the struggle of human experience and the life of faith. Denise Hopkins says, “Without the angry laments we are cut off from the opportunity to be honest and whole in our prayers.” Read Psalm 22 again. Where do you see faithfulness even through pain? In life’s sorrow do you find it helpful to lament to God? Have you ever challenged or demanded that God come to your aid? What might your faithful lament sound like?

Prayer: My God, my God! Hear me when I cry out to you and come to my aid. Amen.

Saturday – Read Psalm 100

Psalm 100 is a hymn of praise to God that calls the faithful to worship with abandon. When defining the praise of God Walter Brueggemann writes: “Praise is the duty and delight, the ultimate vocation of the human community; indeed of all creation. Yes, all of life is aimed toward God and finally exists for the sake of God. Praise articulates and embodies our capacity to yield, submit, and abandon ourselves in trust and gratitude to the One whose we are.” In our worship of God too often we hold ourselves in restraint. What would it feel like to be less restrained, less proper and dignified; and