

Psalms: Offer God Thanks and Praise Sunday, 8/1/21

Last week, we came to grips with the necessity of confession. The psalms teach us that the brokenness of sin can be forgiven and made whole when we turn to God in confession. This week, we'll come to better understand what it means to thank, praise and worship God. The psalms teach us that praising and serving God is an imperative, not only in the sanctuary but in all of life.

Nothing prepares you to praise and serve God like immersing yourself in a page full of ancient Hebrew text, right? Perhaps not. This is Psalm 103 in a modern approximation of what it might have looked like when it was written, but with verse numbers and word spacing added to help us out, rather than just one long string of characters written from right to left on a scroll! The little dashes and dots that you see indicate the vowels that are implied by the context but not actually written. Those vowel points were added hundreds of years later, so they would have been absent from the scroll.

I show you this for a couple of reasons. The first is to remind you that all the psalms were written like this originally, thousands of years ago. That means there's a vast amount of cultural and linguistic history intervening between the original and the English translations we use. On top of that, ancient Hebrew was a very fluid kind of language, with unusually large ranges of meaning and the somewhat distressing practice of simply omitting the writing of words that everyone would have known to mentally insert as they read. It's difficult to learn, and difficult to read.

On the other hand, there's a certain amount of fun, maybe even joy, in reading a language where meaning isn't as black and white as it is in many modern cultures. I don't often take much time with the Greek and Hebrew texts anymore, but I did allow myself to get a little lost in the Hebrew in preparing the message this week, and I hope I can share a little of the joy I experienced in doing so. Before we do that, I'm going to read our second psalm for the morning. As you hear these words from Psalm 103, be reflecting on the reasons we offer praise to God. I'm reading from the New Living Translation.

{Read Psalm 103:1-6, 8-18 NLT}

Depending on the English translation you're reading, you'll either see this Hebrew word translated "bless" or "praise." You may remember singing in worship, "Bless the Lord,

oh my soul.” And yet in the New Living Translation we usually read from, you’ll hear “Praise the Lord” instead of “Bless the Lord.” Which one is right? The answer is neither and both! In English, the verbs “bless” and “praise” can have significantly different meanings. But in the Hebrew lexicon, the meaning here is clear: “Adore with bended knee!”¹

Isn’t that great! It’s a bit of a mouthful. Imagine singing, “Adore the Lord with bended knee, oh my soul!” It wouldn’t work so well. So we usually translate this as “praise” in modern English. But oh, what a loss that is. If I tell you we’re going to sing a praise song or hymn in worship, it sounds so ordinary. But what if I said we’re going to adore the Lord with bended knee today? Doesn’t that really take it to the next level? Adoration is so much more than simple praise. Adoration engages the heart. And the bended knee? It says so much about our relationship to God, creature and creator, and it places the praise squarely in the context of worship.

The praise of God that the psalmist had in mind goes beyond simply affirming that God is good. And it’s not the kind of praise that’s offered casually on a Sunday morning between eating breakfast and grocery shopping. This is existential praise, defining not only who and why we worship but who we are. Bless the Lord! Praise the Lord! Adore the Lord with bended knee!

Here’s another Hebrew word that gets muddled in translation. Modern translations render the word “worship,” a word that each of us usually processes in our minds and in our hearts as your typical Sunday morning experience, both the good and the bad. Your experience of worship may include the sanctuary being too hot or too cold, having to listen to the same announcements you heard last week, and struggling to stay alert until the end of the message. But really, the psalmist intended something entirely different. Instead, the English translation you’ll see in the King James version is “serve.” So in Psalm 100, we could say “serve the Lord with gladness” rather than “worship the Lord with gladness.”² Here’s one of the few times I actually prefer the King James translation. The lexical meaning is “to work for or serve God.”³ Sometimes this is used with Temple worship in mind, but it really

¹ *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament (Abridged)*. Brown, Driver, Briggs.

² Psalm 100:2. New Living Translation (2nd Edition).

³ *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament (Abridged)*. Brown, Driver, Briggs.

retains the broader meaning of service.

By the way, can you see how we wound up with the modern conflation of the two terms in “worship service?” It’s really a redundant rendering of the same term! When we gather to worship, we’re coming to serve the Lord. Whenever, and wherever, we serve the Lord, we’re in effect worshipping, offering a sacrifice to the Lord with our words and actions. Isn’t that beautiful? This is what I meant when I said Hebrew is a broad and fluid language. Our English language has allowed us to put God and our faith into little boxes. Worship was never intended to be limited to whatever the church Staff and Leaders can cobble together within sixty minutes on a Sunday morning.

Instead of welcoming you to worship each Sunday, maybe I should say, “welcome to serving God with Buffalo United Methodist Church!” That really changes the frame of worship, doesn’t it? That is why we’ve gathered: to serve the Lord and to do the work of the Lord.

Here’s a Hebrew noun that gets a little lost in our translations of the psalms. We’ve often sung the line, “I will enter his courts with thanksgiving in my heart,” which is derived from Psalm 100:4, “Enter his gates with thanksgiving.”⁴ What do we think of when we think of thanksgiving? And I don’t mean turkey and mashed potatoes! The simplest definition of thanksgiving is giving thanks, right? Thank you Lord for (fill in the blank). We usually jump to the idea of saying thanks, while what the psalmist had in mind is both broader and deeper. The lexical meaning of this noun is “praise, adoration, or thanksgiving.”⁵ There’s that word again: adoration. We’ve already seen it used together with praise, and as before it transforms thanksgiving from a simple act into a matter of the heart. When we enter the Lord’s presence, we’re to do so not only with our words, but the inclination of our hearts as well as our actions, all consistently reflecting gratitude for who God is and what God has done. Adoration connotes again that “bended knee” idea, that thanksgiving involves a recognition that we are the creatures and God is the creator.

Are you beginning to see how interwoven all these ideas are? Praise, worship, and thanksgiving aren’t unique elements of an event on Sunday morning called worship. They’re

⁴ Psalm 100:4. Ibid.

⁵ *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament (Abridged)*. Brown, Driver, Briggs.

different facets of the same thing: an orientation, inclination, and determination to be the people of God, answering God's call to serve in doing the work of God. They're not parts of a program that you can choose to engage in or tune out from as an individual, they're profoundly relational, requiring the presence of your whole self with God and with God's people. They're not spectator words, but a call for an earnestness of heart and action.

I have just one more Hebrew word to share with you, and you'll find it in the first verse of Psalm 100: "Shout with joy to the Lord, all the earth!"⁶ Think about that for a moment. When do you usually shout in the course of a day or week? You might shout at a soccer tournament. You might shout out a warning to someone. You might even shout at someone you're angry with. But have you ever shouted with joy to God, in church or out of church? Part of that is cultural conditioning, but I wonder if it's not also a heart issue. Nobody is capable of shouting with joy in a casual, half-hearted way. You're either in or out, and shouting underlines your wholehearted commitment. I don't think we'll be shouting anytime soon during Sunday worship, but in a way, that's shame, isn't it?

So I offer you this substitute, which is one the Israelites themselves used. The lexical range of this Hebrew word includes, "Give a blast with a horn."⁷ So here you go. A blast from the shofar that I brought home from my trip to Israel. {sound shofar}. Shout with joy to the Lord, all the earth!

Praise, adoration, thanksgiving, and service to God were never intended to be optional for God's people. The praise psalms often use imperative forms of verbs, giving them the force of commands, as they are in Psalm 100. Because of who God is, and because of who we were created to be, our purpose is to serve God. Why? Because of God's faithful, unfailing love. Because of God's tenderhearted compassion and merciful forgiveness. And because that's how we discover what it means to live in joy and contentment. So serve the Lord with gladness, give thanks to him and bless his name.

Please take some time now to reflect on your adoration and service to God.

⁶ Psalm 100:1. Ibid.

⁷ *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament (Abridged)*. Brown, Driver, Briggs.



Bill Reinhart, Pastor
pastorbill@buffaloumc.com