

The Imperative of Praise

Menno Mennonite Church
December 28, 2025

Purpose: To elevate the role of praise as a spiritual practice

Message: As people of faith, we are invited into the chorus of praise for all that God is doing in our midst

Scripture: Psalm 148 [I will read]; Isaiah 52:7-10 (Please read)

Synopsis: Praise makes us a bit itchy. We don't really do praise songs, and are not given to testimony as a primary expression of what is going on for our faith. Somehow we feel that faith is a far more serious matter, where we integrate our work and living into what we are about, and to sing praises is just shouting about things unnecessarily. It is something that Pentecostals do; not something we are given to all that much. Yet praise of God's deeds is an incarnation of all that God is in the world. Yet, after the disorientation of advent, calling us to prepare again for the coming of God, and the reorienting act of incarnation, what else left from but the praise filled lifting of all of life to God, an activity that ultimately includes all of creation.

Praise is more than just what we do to perform for God, but ultimately challenges us toward the work that God continues to do around us.

<https://share.evernote.com/note/3aaf81f3-ecb5-4765-bed3-8cc8d9acc2fb>

Praise the Lord from heaven!
Praise God on the heights!

² Praise God, all of you who are his messengers!
Praise God, all of you who comprise his heavenly forces!

³ Sun and moon, praise God!
All of you bright stars, praise God!

⁴ You highest heaven, praise God!
Do the same, you waters that are above the sky!

⁵ Let all of these praise the Lord's name
because God gave the command and they were created!

⁶ God set them in place always and forever.
God made a law that will not be broken.

⁷ Praise the Lord from the earth,
you sea monsters and all you ocean depths!

⁸ Do the same, fire and hail, snow and smoke,
stormy wind that does what God says!

⁹ Do the same, you mountains, every single hill,
fruit trees, and every single cedar!

¹⁰ Do the same, you animals—wild or tame—
you creatures that creep along and you birds that fly!

¹¹ Do the same, you kings of the earth and every single person,
you princes and every single ruler on earth!

¹² Do the same, you young men—young women too!—
you who are old together with you who are young!

¹³ Let all of these praise the Lord's name
because only God's name is high over all.
Only God's majesty is over earth and heaven.

¹⁴ God raised the strength^[a] of his people,
the praise of all his faithful ones—
that's the Israelites,
the people who are close to him.
Praise the Lord!

We have a lot to be thankful for. Christmas is here. While the 12 days of Christmas exists only in the recollection of the song that we like to sing about once a season, recounting all the various gifts involved, we are in a season that was meant to be more than just a culminating event of a single day. Traditionally this would be a festive season all the way until the celebration of the three king's day with all the merriment to go with it. Now we are a few days down the road from the day and we might be looking for where to store the tree for another year. In the ways big and small we have enjoyed much of the holidays and will look forward to getting back to things more ordinary with the turning of the calendar this year. There is a lot to be thankful for, both in terms of the working of good things for another year and for the list of thank yous that perhaps are now waiting to be written for what we have been received. The year, in its good and bad is winding short and we are rightly, graciously, thankful for where we have seen God in our midst for it and we ought to say so. A giving of thanks fits the season.

But that is not what this Psalm is about. Its agenda is something different all together. This is a Psalm of praise. It is a song that asks us to lay down all that we have, all that we are doing, all that we are and ascribe praise to God. Why: because God is God and that is good. We are joining all creation—literally—in the work of praising the creator for God is God and we are not. Which is something that we are around but we don't always know what to do with. We are far more acquainted with the mode of Thanksgiving. We understand an enumeration of blessings received and realized and attributing them to God. We received and we say thank you, just as is right and proper with all gifts we know.

Praise though has an imperative tone. This is not mere suggestion or good idea—it is a command that all creation praise the one who made it. Our language softens the notion of command here, leaving a good idea and a unalterable demand on the same grammatical standing. The Hebrew demands that we praise—Hallelu—YHWH- YH—a bit of the original language that survives to this day. Because praise has its own logic. There is nothing of the ego here to do. Praise just asks us to recognize God beyond our stuff, our conditions, our state of mind, or our present circumstance and attribute glory to God. Without concern what we get out of the experience (though it is rich). With a receipt of goods or services for the bargain. Praise rises out of the worthiness of the one who is praised, and their condition of glory without a whole lot of concern for what we get in the bargain.

I'll go ahead and say it: this is not entirely our kind of work. We don't do praise all that well. We look on praising as that which involves the raising of hands and the channeling of emotions that mainline Protestantism is not always all that comfortable with. We believe it worth while, sure, but we aren't all that good with it, and are not always sure where it takes us when we do. We have outsourced more of the emotional sides of faith to our Pentecostal brothers and sisters then trying to find the right mode and mean to openly praise God. Even in a season such as this where we celebrate God with us we are not always sure what to do with our hallelujahs least they not be sufficiently full throated or well executed to fit our expectations of adequacy or enough to match those that we have heard with fuller, finer voice. Our anthem of *Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow* is a work of doxology; the giving of praise to God. But it often comes stiffly to us both for want of voice and propriety. Because singing praise to God is ultimately about self abandonment. About putting on hold the demands that we are so used to—the demands of accumulation and provision for us and ours—and taking up the notion that it is God who has full and final control of the universe and all that is in it. It reminds us that it is not we who will steer the final story of history. Praise is the work of giving God what is God's, but it leads from there into some pretty big and important things.

For one, praise places us within a creation of praise. Our world is a work of praise because it is a reflection of God within it. In ancient times, one might claim that one god or another has dominion over an element of the universe, as in Greek constructions we have Poseidon ruling over the sea, Dionysus is the god of wine and festivals, Pan, governing flocks and shepherds and on and on to construct a whole pantheon holding the world together. What Judaic worship has the audacity to say is that YHWH is in everything, from the movements of the heavens, to the very deeps of the oceans, YHWH is in all and over all, without equal, without helper, and that is worthy to be praised. This is more than just mere cultural chest thumping: "Our God is bigger than your God". It's a different way of looking at a being in the world that is unlike anything else known to culture. Creation, the work of God's hands joins in the work of praising God as well. This might push our intellectualized way of understanding things where the sea monsters and elements join the praise of YHWH God. But perhaps this too could be the limits of our imagination placing too clean a division between the words of praise and a creation of praise. Praise is not limited to words, after all. If we human can dance in glory of the Lord, why not the flight of an hummingbird. If we can through up our arms in gratitude, why can't a

Saguaro lifting its arms to heaven be an expression of praise. We are creations of God's hand, and praise become part of embracing the creation all around us. We can understand ourselves within the created world and part of what God is doing in the world, we have all the more reason to add our voices, our actions, our lives to the cacophony of nature in the praise of God.

Second, praise gets us out of ourselves and into God which is something that we ourselves need desperately. Many times, we get the notion that Praise is something that God needs, like our telling God just how impressed we are with God. We might think that God desires praise because God's ego looks like our own, only a whole lot bigger, desiring the "Oh God you are so big, so absolutely huge, so awesome. We are all really impressed down here, I'll tell you that..." It's not about that, though. God is God regardless of our impulse to praise or not. It is about us knowing and expressing how we fit into the world that God has created, a task that young, old, new to the faith or old in the pew are all invited to—noticing what God is doing, and declaring that insight where and how it is seen.

That allows us to take from our shoulders, however briefly, the crippling responsibility for the way things are all around us. We are so given to seeing problems, and the challenges that go with them that sometimes that is all that we can see. Sometimes we can feel all but lost for want of any way of being able to address the issues of the day. Praise allows us to ascribe to God the ultimacy that is God's and to remind ourselves that it is within that presence that we finally live and move. We should feel the burden of a society of many sorrows and still more woes. We should take seriously our role in leaving our world better than what we found it. But we cannot do so without also knowing that this is God's care too and calling ourselves to trust in that care as the final authority in all that is. We need the relief of praise lest the demands of the present prove too devastating for us to deal with.

Praise invites us again and again to leave ourselves behind and engage in what God is about, and what God is going in the world. Walter Bruggeman calls the need for praise a "lyrical self abandonment, yielding the self and its desires to the purposes and desires of God." Praise asks us to be involved in that which is bigger than we, to ascribe glory to the one who is author of the world, not to get God to like us, or to curry favor, or to appease the deity in the hope of another good year of productive crops. God already likes us more than what we can ever express, more than what we can know in the long run. So much so God chose to come and dwell among us, saving us God will provide for us, no matter what happens to us in the meantime, in

living or in dying, in embrace or in separation. As the song writer remarks, we praise simply because “Love is Lord of heaven and earth” and as such there is no way we can keep from singing along with all of creation? That is the nature of praise; responding in love the very nature of God.

In this season of new birth and celebration we are invited to—implored to—go beyond the passive recollections of things long ago and take up again the joy that is Christ with us. Not just then but even here and even now. Christ in our challenges and our failures. Christ in our fears and our certainties. Christ in and among and through our praise and our muteness. Christ with us in all that is and all that will or can be. That is good news. That is worth celebration and living each and every day. May we know all that God is up to as we join the praise of God with us, and in praising find ourselves too changed.

May this ever be on our lips, to God’s glory. Amen.