

*The Hope of God's People*

July 12, 2020: Outdoor Worship  
Menno Mennonite Church

**Message:** Praise of the Lord calls us to a greater identity with and reliance on the provision of God's love.

**Purpose:** To challenge the notion of the psalms as merely a declaration of the attributes of God, but also a call to rely on those attributes for our strength and salvation..

**Scripture:** Psalm 33:1-17, 22

**Synopsis:** We often look to the psalms merely as a source of praise material, only speaking of the praise of God with something akin to unflappable praise of the nature of God. This is not where we tend to turn for serious theology, deep thought, or challenging themes of peace and justice. Yet when we come to it, there is much more in the psalmist's range than just singing the praises of God. Naming the attributes of God calls us to rely on those attributes for our basic identity, our basic security. The psalms bring us through basic declarations as to who God is and call us to live as God's people living out the promises of God as real hope, strong promises, and a new song of hope and change in the world.

**Scripture: Psalm 33:1-22** <sup>NRS</sup> **Psalm 33:1** Rejoice in the LORD, O you righteous. Praise befits the upright. <sup>2</sup> Praise the LORD with the lyre; make melody to him with the harp of ten strings. <sup>3</sup> Sing to him a new song; play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts. <sup>4</sup> For the word of the LORD is upright, and all his work is done in faithfulness. <sup>5</sup> He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the steadfast love of the LORD. <sup>6</sup> By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth. <sup>7</sup> He gathered the waters of the sea as in a bottle; he put the deeps in storehouses. <sup>8</sup> Let all the earth fear the LORD; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him. <sup>9</sup> For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm. <sup>10</sup> The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; he frustrates the plans of the peoples. <sup>11</sup> The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations. <sup>12</sup> Happy is the nation whose God is the LORD, the people whom he has chosen as his heritage. <sup>13</sup> The LORD looks down from heaven; he sees all humankind. <sup>14</sup> From where he sits enthroned he watches all the inhabitants of the earth-- <sup>15</sup> he who fashions the hearts of them all, and observes all their deeds. <sup>16</sup> A king is not saved by his great army; a warrior is not delivered by his great strength. <sup>17</sup> The war horse is a vain hope for victory, and by its great might it cannot save. <sup>22</sup> Let your steadfast love, O LORD, be upon us, even as we hope in you.

BLT

Rejoice in the LORD, O you righteous.

Praise befits the upright.

<sup>2</sup> Praise the LORD with the lyre;  
make melody to YHWH with the harp of ten strings.

<sup>3</sup> Sing to God a new song;  
play skillfully on the strings,  
with loud battle cries.

For the word of the LORD is righteous,  
and all his work is done in faithfulness.

<sup>5</sup> YHWH loves righteousness and justice;  
the earth is full of the steadfast love of the LORD.

<sup>6</sup> By the word of the LORD the heavens were made,  
and all their host by the breath of God's mouth.

<sup>7</sup> The Lord gathered the waters of the sea as in a bottle;  
YHWH put the deeps in storehouses.

<sup>8</sup> Therefore, let all the earth fear the LORD;  
let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of YHWH.

<sup>9</sup> For God spoke, and it came to be;  
YHWH commanded, and it stood firm.

<sup>10</sup> The LORD brings the designs of the nations to nothing;  
he frustrates the plans of the peoples.

<sup>11</sup> The counsel of the LORD stands forever,  
the thoughts of God's heart to all generations.

<sup>12</sup> Happy is the nation whose God is the LORD,  
the people whom YHWH has chosen as God's heritage.

<sup>13</sup> The LORD looks down from heaven;  
YHWH sees all humankind.

<sup>14</sup> From where YHWH sits enthroned he watches all the inhabitants of the earth—  
<sup>15</sup> God who fashions the hearts of them all,  
and observes all their deeds.

<sup>16</sup> A king is not saved by his great army;  
a warrior is not delivered by his great strength.  
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This might seem a bit unorthodox, but not all scripture is quite equal. It's a bit of an article of faith that All scripture is breathed by the living God and as such is of similar value. While it is true that we value the whole of the text—each of the various elements of the text gets used in different ways. We turn the historical narratives of the Old Testament for a recounting of the history of God's working with and through Israel and a telling of the great stories of creation and faith. In the gospels we look for the wondrous deeds and words of Jesus who leads us on as Christian disciples. In the Prophets we incline ourselves to hear the cry of those who call Israel and us today to new faithfulness and a turning toward the way of God. Even in the eschatological literature, the books of Revelation and Daniel, we are challenged by the depictions of judgment and retribution that lie beside promises of glory and praise of a coming triumphant God. For every genre within the biblical canon, there is a role within the life of the church and the life of faith. Even those extended genealogies in the Old Testament with all their begats have their place, especially on those occasions when you might be looking for an effective non-narcotic sleep aid.

We need the whole breadth of the text to speak to the different elements of life, and the different functions of faith. We cite our texts as proofs for our arguments, or just look for something nice to read for a given occasion. The Psalms generally fall in the latter of these categories. If you remember several weeks ago (and there really is no reason why you would or should, especially as time has stopped having a whole lot of meaning right now), I spoke to how the Psalms give a balance in our life—and a menu for the ways of the being in the world, and how it is to live our lives of faith. On that occasion I offered 3 broad categories of the ways that the Psalms work in our lives: as words of orientation, desolation or dis-orientation, and re-orientation. I wanted to come back and unpack those elements a bit more, working a bit with the meaning and impact of these categories, what they mean, and how they can open the breadth of the Psalms to us more broadly. At the end of it all the Psalms speak to us with huge variety and life, placing all of life into conversation with the work of God's hand. Yet, we don't often come here. The Psalms, it would seem, are simply not up to bearing the theological weight of our core beliefs. In the Anabaptist tradition especially with our emphasis on biblically influenced and supported belief and practice and less on contemplative worship of the nature of God, often times we leave the psalms out of our primary canon. And we are poorer for it.

The first of these categories is that of orientation—what we have here. These are the moments when things are going right and well and the singer knows the song, the tune, and where it takes us. If you would drop me a cue of “there’s a spot in Indiana” I am fairly likely to take that as a cue to launch into the various verses of the Goshen College alma mater, not so much because I am proud Maple Leaf (a truly intimidating athletic notion if I have ever heard one), but because the song and its line are so unique and, frankly odd, four part harmony and all, that it is hard to shake. Think of something that you might hear in the halls of an English prep school, or perhaps with a ruckus pub some place. Its basic virtue is that it serves its purpose—to sing the praises and purposes of the alma mater and to connect us to the values and the meaning of what those School days may have meant.

That is what a song of orientation does—it tells the story of the way of the world as we prefer it and know it to be. These are the psalmic hymns that we know well—singing praises to God and about the nation who relies on YHWH for the way forward. There is a naming of the world as it is—really is in the ultimate sense as we seek the way and means of God moving forward, and aligning the way of the people in the way it should be—toward the way of God. In short, these are the psalms as we are given to understand them—praise filled, up beat and declarative of the goodness of the Lord.

But that is not to say that there is not content here. This is a comprehensive writing with the number of lines corresponding to the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet—not accidental in the least for ancient poetry. In light of the glory of YHWH, the power of the very word of God in creating the universe, the reader is called to awe in the might and power of the most high. It is in light of this awesome power that is ascribed to YHWH that the reader and the nation is called to question the source of security in the world. What, the psalmist seems to ask, are the machines of war, power, and human might in comparison to the one who holds all of the worlds affairs in order to their very end. The people are called in verse 3 to a new song, a new naming of the present provision for the nation based not on the arguments of covenant and law, but based on the logic of God being about the powerful work of God on behalf of God’s people. The way of God here is not just being praised—though it is that—but also being held up as the model of and guide for life in the true way of Israel. Orientation is not just about pointing the way to God, and singing about God, but inviting God’s people to own that orientation in true and powerful ways.

Orientation serves the purpose as you would well imagine—it constructs the world as it should be and invites us to be shaped by that way, that vision of a saving, loving God. Our faith is based on the identity of God. The Psalmist seems to offer here a logic that goes beyond a building block of select arguments and verses, but whose basis is first and foremost based on the very nature of God and grows out of the praise of God. The reason to hope in God's love, God's faithfulness, God's power for God's people is that YHWH is the one who with but a word creates, loves, and controls the universe, who knows the hearts of each and every person and loves each one throughout all of time. The foundation of hope, we are told, is in the very nature of who God is, and absent that foundation all might be lost. It is this is that we declare within the congregation, and from that declaration, we are formed into the nation of God.

We need this praising logic. It is the logic of praise, the logic of remembering who and what God is that calls us to live out a new life and new song in the world. It helps us to remember that the world, as complex and maddening as it is, is not, at the end of the day resting on our shoulders alone, but is being created still. God is the God who actively forms the world with a word, who loves righteousness and justice, who fills the earth with mercy, who foils the plans of the nations, who fills the empty with food, whose eyes are on all God's children. God is God and we have a new song to sing, a new story to tell, and new hope that never dies. God is God and we are called to be a boundary-less nation whose god is YHWH, whose promise is a faithful and unending love, whose deliverance lies far outside the power of the world, but lies within the power of God's unending love.

That is an orientation worth celebrating and worth being shaped by all the time. Sometimes we don't feel the way of God in our lives, and we need to be able to grab onto the words that would shape the world into something always new. It is precisely because that these proclamations are not always our first language or come readily to mind that we need to be oriented toward them, be shaped by them and moved toward them time and again. Not that we always believe these things as fully as we might. Not that we always and forever declare in fully voices what we know to be true about God. That is why these are congregational songs as much as they are orientations of personal conviction. There are times where we need others to sing for us and to carry the tune when we cannot, and when the notes are not ours.

The fact that God's praise is not ALWAYS our first song does not mean that the orientation is lost on us. Sometimes we need precisely this sort of reminder of the truer nature of things to help us put one foot in front of the next, and to hold our north star steering us, however forcefully or not toward God and toward the Kingdom of God. That is the purpose of praise, and what brings us back time and again to the world that God has created for us and is re-creating still.

May we remain ever moving toward God and oriented to God hope and God's truth as we are led forward. Amen.