

2nd Sunday of Christmas Yr B, 3/01/2021

Ps 147:12-20; Jn 1:10-18

Pastor Garth Wehrfritz-Hanson

“Praise the LORD”

Praise the LORD! Or as Eugene Peterson renders it in *The Message*, “Hallelujah!” which is the Hebrew word meaning to praise the LORD. Psalm 147 is one among the collection of Psalms 146-150, all of which begin and end with the exhortation to “Praise the LORD!” My *Lutheran Study Bible* (p. 849), identifies Psalm 147 as a hymn of praise for community worship. It gives the psalm the following title: “Praise for God’s Care for Jerusalem,” and the Good News Bible titles it: “In Praise of God the Almighty.”

So what is God to be praised for? The short answer is everything. Our psalm beginning at verse 12, provides at least two reasons. First, the psalmist exhorts God’s people, who may have recently returned from exile, to praise God for blessing his people with the basics of life—namely, shelter and food. The LORD has blessed his people by giving them Jerusalem, which is a safe and secure place to live. There is peace, shalom within the city. That means physical prosperity, health, well-being, justice in the political and economic realms, a sense of unity and harmony among God’s people, and spiritually, being in right relationship with God.

The second reason the psalmist gives for praising God is acknowledgement of God the Creator’s sovereign rule over all of creation. The Creator is in control of all the elements, including: snow, frost, hail, wind and water. The wind, in Hebrew *ruach*, can also mean spirit—God’s creative Spirit, reminiscent of the time when, in Genesis, God created the universe and the Spirit of God moved across the face of the waters.

However, there is another interesting image the psalmist includes in verse 15: “his (i.e. God’s) word runs swiftly.” This image is a personification of God’s word.

That, of course, links us to our gospel, where Jesus is described as God's Word, who always existed with the Creator to help create the whole universe. After that, God surprised everyone: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us." The Word became a human being, the Word literally pitched his tent among us to live in this world. Theologians call this the Incarnation. Jesus became a human being like us.

The gospel goes on to tell us that Jesus the Word who became a human being like us was however without sin—he "was full of grace and truth." If he was "full of grace and truth," then there is no room for the opposites of grace and truth to exist within him. The writer says something else wonderful about Jesus' fullness in verse 16: "From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace." WOW! Did you hear that! Grace upon grace, or grace after grace, or as some translate it: grace instead of grace.

Grace upon grace, or grace after grace can be understood as grace never running out—there is always more than enough grace, it is God's ever-constant renewable resource. The Good News Bible captures something of this way of understanding grace in verse 16: "Out of the fullness of his grace he has blessed us all, giving us one blessing after another." Grace instead of grace, as one scholar suggested (Dr. Wm. Barclay), that there are different types of grace in the different stages of our life. God knows our needs when we are young, middle-aged and old, rich or poor, suffering or succeeding, sad or joyful, and so on—hence God provides us with the type of grace that we need in the wide array of life's circumstances.

Grace is something you can never get but only be given. There's no way to earn it or deserve it or bring it about any more than you can deserve the taste of raspberries and cream or earn good looks or bring about your own birth.

A good sleep is grace and so are good dreams. Most tears are grace. The smell of rain is grace. Somebody loving you is grace. Loving somebody is grace. Have you ever tried to love somebody?

The grace of God means something like: Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are because the party wouldn't have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and wonderful things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. I love you. Nothing can ever separate us. It's for you I created the universe. I love you.

There's only one catch. Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you'll reach out and take it. Maybe being able to reach out and take it is a gift, too.¹ I think so.

Speaking of God's grace as a gift and being given the grace to receive it, that reminds me of the following story: John and Emma were an elderly couple, who often had barely enough to make ends meet. One Christmas, Emma decided they would give themselves a treat: she would make a Christmas pudding.

However, when she saw the result—a huge, rich pudding—she felt it was an extravagance for the two of them, so she wrote an anonymous note, fastened it to the pudding, wrapped it up and placed it on the step of the local Children's Home.

Now, grateful as the Matron was, she really had more puddings than she knew what to do with, but she thought that the pastor would appreciate it, so she left it on his doorstep.

But the pastor was always thinking of others rather than himself. There must be someone in the village who needed this more than him—John and Emma, of course!

So the pudding completed its journey. Christmas is, after all, about giving and receiving!²

The greatest gift we can receive and then give, and then receive over and over again is Jesus and his gift of grace upon grace. Grace that never runs out, Grace that never stops. Grace that never gives up on you or me or anybody. Jesus the Word

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological A B C* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), pp. 33-34.

² Unfortunately I've lost the source of this wonderful Christmas story.

becoming flesh and living among us is, as the psalmist says, God's word that runs swiftly—swiftly to every corner of the world to offer his loving grace to all people.

So, during this season of Christmas we continue to celebrate the birth of Jesus the Word becoming flesh and living among us. As Jesus continues to live within and among us, let us praise the LORD! And sing along with hymn writer Ken Bible (interesting last name): Love has come and never will leave us! Love is life ever-/lasting and free. Love is Jesus within and among us./Love is the peace our hearts are seeking. Love! Love! Love is the/gift of Christmas. Love! Love! Praise to you, God on high! (#292, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*)