

“We Are No Longer Waiting”
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Psalm 148
Luke 2:22-40

In our church, we mark time a LOT. I told you at the start of Advent that it was the church’s New Year’s Day– the liturgical year begins with the season of preparation, 4 weeks before the birth of Christ. Tomorrow it will be New Year’s Day in the Gregorian calendar, which most of the modern world uses to mark time. But we also know that our Jewish friends mark the new year on Rosh Hashanah, and many Asian cultures mark the new year with the second new moon after the winter solstice– in our church, we will mark that on February 11.

Whenever you mark the new year, and however you mark it– you may make resolutions or spiritual intentions. You might try a dry January. Others prefer a champagne toast, some of you like funny hats, others noisemakers, and in my family you wear polka dots and stuff coins in your pockets and full, red grapes in your cupboard for a round and prosperous year. But if you like fireworks, then read the last 5 Psalms– numbers 146-150– in the book of Psalms.

Each one of these Psalms erupts with words of praise. Psalm 148 makes it clear that our vocation is to praise God. This is not just the vocation of the faithful. It is the vocation of the young and the old, men and women, princes, kings, and ordinary people. It is the vocation of the angels, the sun and the moon. Not only that, praise is the vocation of the snow and the wind, the cedar tree and the fruit tree, creeping things and flying birds.

Set within these 5 psalms of praise, it is like a cacophony of praise, a dazzling and booming firework finale set to music, thudding so hard you feel its rhythms overtake your very own heart. Your heart’s very reason for beating? *It beats to praise God.*

But how does a sea monster or a fire, a mountain or a cedar praise God?¹ How do we praise God? The answer is– as verse 7 declares, it is by fulfilling God’s command. That is, we praise God by being who God created us to be. As we approach a new year, it is a good time to reassess and ask ourselves, “Who are we created to be, and what are we called to do as people of God? Are we praising God with who we are and what we do?”

I enjoyed witnessing an example of what that praise looked like, last week while I spent a few days with family at my sister-in-law’s country house in Connecticut. My daughter, on the second day, asked if she could go outside “forestring.” So we let her venture on her own into the woods, giving her the boundary of always needing to see the house from the woods, and we warned her to watch out for bears. From different windows of the house, I caught glimpses of her

¹Paul K. Hooker, “Psalm 148: Exegetical Perspective” in *Feasting on the Word* Year B Vol. 2 ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor p. 378

mulberry jacket, moving in contrast to the still grays, browns, and beiges of the winter woods. She spent at least an hour there, on her own, peeking in and out of trees, singing and telling stories to herself as she pulled fallen limber into a shelter and crouched beneath it. The next time she asked to go foresting, Chris went with her, and was witness to the splendor of a shimmery and colorful world her imagination spun out of the gray, brown, and beige of bare trees, dead leaves, and fallen branches. The third time she convinced her cousin to leave his Christmas toys behind and come foresting her. I peeked at them while I walked the dog, but did not want to disturb whatever their imaginations were working on. These children were doing the work of praise, in partnership with their forest host, which revealed in its aged and newer trees, its fungal clusters, its leaf carpet floor, its winter berries, its evidence of animal homes, its fallen branches, the bounty of life, and of death. When they were done foresting, they had a peace to them that was different than their disposition after an hour of watching TV or playing indoors with toys.

Praise is how God orients us to respond in relation to God, and to being part of God's creation. Of course, there are people who will not praise. We remember that Herod, in the fragility of his ego, was threatened by the Christ child, and so he sought the location of this child so that, as he said, "he could praise him." But this was fake praise; what Herod really intended was to kill Jesus.

In this time, we need to be wary of those with fake praise— who say words that seem appropriate or even effusive, who say "peace, peace," but their agenda is really violence and domination. If they want to show praise, it is not for God or for God's creation; the praise they seek is to serve their own aggrandizement. As the church in Bethlehem noted in a Christmas sermon this year, if we want to see where Jesus is born, and to praise him, we have to be willing to look beneath the rubble— not to some throne or high place.

Considering the many troubles of the world, it can be hard to muster praise. What happens to praise when we are waiting for a justice that has yet to be seen? What happens when we can no longer praise? When we are dealing with depression, or a physical infirmity, or age? For reasons mental, or physical, or even spiritual when our bodies cannot lift themselves to the task that praise asks of us? As for Anna the prophet and Simeon the devout man, they lived lives of faithfulness and prayer. But still, something was missing. We get the sense they weren't at the place of praise yet, before Mary and Joseph walked into the Temple, carrying Jesus. Anna spent her life in relative isolation. She had been widowed after only seven years of marriage. When Luke's gospel presents her, she is in her eighties. Scripture says that Anna never left the Temple, but stayed there fasting and in prayer day and night. Waiting. Do you know anyone who lives like that? Secluded, and seemingly waiting on something that may or may not be within their reach? But when Anna meets Jesus, her response is praise, and it is connection, as she tells everyone she sees that this is the one who will redeem their people. As for Simeon, he tells God— and I am going to paraphrase this: "Finally, I can die now! I have seen and done all I am called to do. The rest is up to you, God, and I trust that through this child, salvation will come, and glory, too— not only for Israel, but for even those who did not yet know you."

If Simeon had stopped there, *that* would be a great blessing. But he goes on to say to Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed--and a sword will pierce your own soul too.” Maybe Simeon was no longer waiting and could die in peace, but I can imagine that Mary was *left* waiting to see how this blessing would also break her heart. That is a powerful thing about love, though, isn’t it? To love someone deeply carries the vulnerability with it of what can happen if that beloved one becomes lost to you.

A praise can be silent. Have you ever shared a hush in wonder? We often clap after musical offerings at church, but there have been some solos or choir anthems that are so moving that we want the stillness and silence of the moment to allow the music’s memory that had just been offered to still wash over us. I didn’t get to see Beyonce on her Renaissance tour, though I intend to see the movie. I understand that she had a moment during her performance of the song “Energy” when she sings the lyric, “Look around, everybody on mute.” At that point, the music stops, and the challenge is for the entire stadium arena full of fans to go absolutely silent. According to the internet, New Orleans won the mute challenge because they were the quietest in the five second break; however, Kansas City had a silence that endured for a full 20 seconds. They might not have been quieter than New Orleans, but their time of quiet lasted longer. Even though I wasn’t there, I can imagine that the silence in the arena was full of energy and praise.

Can we use our quiet to praise God? Some may do this during times of meditation or prayer. In this season of Christmas, I think of the feeling when a baby is born, and how those gathered know to have a hush of awe and wonder when they enter the room to meet this new human. I wonder if, as much as there was joy when Mary and Joseph presented Jesus at the Temple, there was also a hush. On the other hand, my Filipino family would say that’s the whitest idea ever– on that side of the family, a baby’s birth is accompanied by very *loud* joy, which was a bit of a surprise when I was postpartum.

Soon our congregation will have the chance to greet a new baby, as we wait for our Afghan friends in Teaneck to welcome their baby within just a few weeks. As it turns out, the three people who have been doing much of the accompanying of this couple never gave birth to babies themselves. It’s been very sweet for me to observe them, from Vicky who was there at the doctor’s appointment when our friend discovered she was pregnant– Vicky said, “I’ve never been there for a pregnancy test that turned positive before!” to Nancy, who organized the rest of us to throw a baby shower, and the two of them and Eulalia who have been driving our friend to doctor’s appointments, which have been many because our friend is being monitored for gestational diabetes. Linda has been helping with these appointments too, though as a mother of two and grandmother as well, this isn’t her first rodeo. All four of these women are in retirement, and they remind me of how important some other folks a generation or more older than Mary were in accompanying Mary before the birth of Jesus– as Elizabeth did– and celebrating after the birth, as the elderly Simeon and Anna did.

Accompanying others is an important way of how we show praise. It can also bring us to a place of praise, when praise is hard to be found. God has made us to be compassionate people,

people who are equipped to give and receive love and care. When we act upon that design, we are praising God. When Mary and Joseph showed up at the temple to complete the ritual sacrifice required of the faithful after childbirth, they offered two turtledoves or pigeons. This was the minimum sacrifice, and was what the covenant listed as what the poor should offer; a wealthier family was supposed to offer a lamb.

My hope is that when we look to welcome someone who has arrived, we treat them as if they are bearing Jesus himself— whether they look like they could fund a building renovation, or like they might need a shoprite gift card so they can buy groceries for their family.

Our church can be a place that reminds us that it is our orientation to praise God. But even beyond the church, it is a good thing to be part of the circle of creation that praises together. This circle gives room for the fallen and rotting tree, knowing that even in its death, it has something of life to offer: food for mushrooms to grow, a den for a family of foxes, a hole in the sky so that sunlight can pour through and nourish other life in the forest, and beams of light streaming on the face of a child dancing.

We are no longer waiting for the New Year's arrival. We are no longer awaiting the birth of the Christ child. The time is now. It is here. Let us live lives of praise.