

“The Last Word is.....Praise”
Psalm 150/Isaiah 6:1-5/Rev. 4:1-11/Luke 2:8-14
FPC/November 22, 2009/St. Andrew’s Sunday
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I. Introduction

Today we come to the end.....the last word. All fall we have journeyed through the book of Psalms in our sermons. We’ve shared Psalms of assurance and hope, laments that cry out to God, words of wisdom about a life lived well, and songs of thanksgiving. Today we come to the end of sermon series on Psalms. And as we come to the end, we also come to the last Psalm; Psalm 150. What is the last word in the book of Psalms?

II. Text: Read Psalm 150.

III. Brief Exegesis

The last word in the book of Psalms is.....Praise. It has built throughout the book. The book of Psalms begins with many honest laments.....cries to God about the way of life. But as the book of Psalms goes on the balance shifts, “the seesaw tilts the other way,” and the cries of lament give way to songs of praise. The last word is praise.

The book of Psalms is also divided into five subsections, or five smaller books. Perhaps this is to correspond to the five books of the Jewish Torah. And at the end of each of these five books is a brief doxology.....a hymn of praise to God. And now as the whole book of Psalms ends there is not a brief doxology.....not a few lines....but a whole Psalm.....Psalm 150.....especially written and placed at the end.....a great chorus of praise. The last word might have been anything.....but it is praise.

The Hebrew word itself, Hallelujah, means “praise YHWH.” It has been sung and said in earlier Psalms. But in this Psalm it is repeated 13 times. The Psalm overflows with praise....Hallelujah is sung again and again. The beginning, the middle, and the last word.....it’s all praise.

The Psalm tells us who to praise; the one God who is present in sanctuary, and who is enthroned beyond the vast edges of the universe. The Psalm tells us why to praise; for God’s acts of creation and salvation, and because of God’s greatness, splendor and beauty. The Psalm tells us how to praise; it’s “everything and the kitchen sink praise,” voice and Scottish dance, strings and bagpipes, harp and drums in a processional, “out of rhythm clapping” and croaking voices (I’m glad about that). And

finally the Psalm tells us who is to offer the praise; all people.....everyone with the breath of life. There is a great equalizer in this Psalm; the God of all is to be praised by all....a great chorus of voice and music....the final word without end....praise.

About 20 years ago now I was in Ghana, Africa for a month. Ghana is a predominately Christian country, converted by 19th C missionaries from Switzerland. The missionaries usually did not live long, often dying of disease, but they came, in missionary wave after wave. And the faith they shared took root. And so did the way they shared it: Black clergy robes, piano, organ and hymns with four-part harmony. But 20 years ago a discussion about the way of worship began brewing; could God be worshipped in African ways? The Ghanaians wanted to respect the great sacrifice of the 19th C Swiss missionaries, but they had come to believe that the great God of all could be best worshipped by them with the words and music of them. Organs and hymns began to give way to drums and dance.....music and movement with an African flavor. It is their contribution to final word.....praise.

And it seems that when we share in the great praise of God....when our “Hallelujahs” join the praises of the others.....we are “peaking behind the curtain” at a greater reality.....a more beautiful truth. Isaiah in his vision of God in Isaiah 6 beholds God upon the throne, and there is a great chorus of praise; “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts, and the whole earth is full of his glory.” (Is. 6:3). At the birth of Christ the glory of God breaks into this world, and the shepherds hear the song of the angels.....the praise of heaven; “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace, whom God greatly favors.” (Lk. 2:14) And in Revelation John shares his vision of God’s throne, and again there is the overwhelming sound of voice and music: “Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come.” (Rev. 4:8). Now we get “peaks and glimpses of a great truth.” But the day will come when “the curtain will be drawn back,” and we shall behold the utter splendor and beauty of God.....and the final word will be praise.

IV. Final Reflections

Since this is St. Andrew’s Sunday, I will uphold a venerable Presbyterian tradition and make three brief points. If the final, overwhelming word is praise, what does that mean?

First, it means at the very least that worship is not about me, or you, but about God. “Hallelujah” means “praise God.” Worship therefore is not primarily about how I feel, what I want, or what I like. Worship is about praising God. Our consumer culture often gets this twisted around so that we think worship is about me. Therefore I’m going to shop around, see who’s offering what, try it on, and see how it makes me feel. It’s

like the Greek story of Narcissus; we fall in love with our reflection in a still pond. We come to think worship is all about me.....or at least primarily about me. Does how we think and feel matter? Sure, but not primarily. In the end I think we find “me centered” worship thin. We find ourselves restless, longing.....hoping there is something more.....someone more....and so we shop some more. Worship about God.....worship that praises God invites us into the holy presence of God.....the utter beauty of God.....and we find that the deepest desires of our hearts and minds find their home.

Second, if the final word is praise that means it tells us something about God. We do not worship God in order to feed some divine ego. We do not lift up praise because of the consequences if we don't. We do not join in worship to earn favors from God. Rather God is holy.....radiant splendor.....utter beauty. Praise is our response to the breath-taking wonder of God. Perhaps you've had a similar experience in seeing a special sunset, tasting that perfect and “still warm” chocolate chip cookie, hearing a moving piece of music, seeing the mystery and wonder of distant galaxies or a living cell, or feel the wind and mist as it blows across a mountain ridge. We stop in wonder..... ..struggle with words that strain to bear the meaning of the experience... ..and know that we are part of something and Someone more than ourselves. Praise is all we can do.

And finally, if the last word is praise, it means that all ends well....it means that we live with hope. At the end of all the laments and thanksgivings.....joys and broken hearts.....accomplishments and disappointments in this life.....in this incomplete kingdom of God.....it will give way to praise when the kingdom of God is complete.....when tears are wiped away.....when death and sin are finally absorbed into the grace and beauty of God. Praise will be the language of that new day.

I was thinking about Handel's Messiah this week. I suppose I was thinking about that because the Shenango Valley Chorale is singing it at FPC this afternoon. And I suppose I was thinking about it because the Hebrew word for praise, “Hallelujah,” is repeated time after time in this Psalm, building to a grand crescendo.....like the “Hallelujah” chorus in “Messiah:” “Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah.” And so I did a little research on Handel's Messiah. Handel wrote it in 1741 in just 24 days, and it premiered in Dublin in 1742. In orchestra, chorus and solos the story of Jesus Christ is told in three parts or movements; birth, passion and resurrection, and return and final reign. And this surprised me; the great Hallelujah chorus of the Messiah does not come at the end of the work, at the end of the third part. Rather it comes at the end of the second part.....at the resurrection and ascension of Christ.....in the middle as Handel wrote it. But that is not how I've heard it performed. Rather, it seems in my memory, I always

hear the great chorus of "Hallelujahs" moved to the end of the performance....no matter which parts are performed. The final song is always the great "Hallelujah" chorus. Now why would that happen? Why would conductors do that? Why would they change the way Handel wrote "Messiah?" I suspect that deep down we want bear witness to something more than we know; the final word.....the final chorus.....the final note.....the final sound.....it will all be praise. "Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah. Amen"