“Creation’s Choir”

Psalm 148

Sunday, April 28, 2013
Rev. Stephanie Swanson
FBC Smithville Pulpit

Psalm 148

1Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights!
2Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his host!
3Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars!
4Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens!
5Let them praise the name of the Lord, for he commanded and they were created.
6He established them forever and ever; he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.
7Praise the Lord from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps,
8fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command!
9Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars!
10Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds!
11Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth!
12Young men and women alike, old and young together!
13Let them praise the name of the Lord, for his name alone is exalted; his glory is above earth and heaven.
14He has raised up a horn for his people, praise for all his faithful, for the people of Israel who are close to him. Praise the Lord!

Thirteen times. Thirteen times the word “praise” appears in Psalm 148. The author clearly had a point to get across. “Praise the Lord” the Psalmist calls at the beginning and close of this psalm. The phrase creates bookends for his call to give honor to God, adding to the poetic flow of the piece. Actually, the final five psalms of the Book of Psalms each begin and end with “Praise the Lord.” While there are different types of psalms, some offering thanks, others making petitions, some lamenting life, these final five have a clear goal in sight – we should praise the Lord. (And on a side note, let me just say, I’m hoping I don’t start tripping over my words here because I’ll probably surpass the 13 times the word “praise” was used in this sermon and to add the word “psalm” on top if it, I’ll be lucky to not mess up one “praise” or “psalm.” Hopefully I won’t get too tongue tied!)

Back to the text though. This psalm does more than just call each of us to praise God. Did you happen to notice when people even showed up in the text? It’s quite late in the psalm. Not until the eleventh verse do we hear mention of any people. The ten verses prior are spent calling the rest of creation to praise God.

Our psalmist begins in the utmost heights. “Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights” (Psalm 148:1). He calls the angels to action, and all the celestial objects – the sun and moon and the stars above. Even the waters above the heavens are called to praise God. Now the angels, we can rally around that. We’ve heard elsewhere of the heavenly host singing praises to God. But the sun and moon? The stars? It’s a bit hard to think of such inanimate objects worshipping God.

And the psalmist goes on, drawing us back down to the earth. It’s an interesting array of things he beckons to sing God’s praises: sea monsters, “all deeps” (whatever that is, probably just the deep waters and all that inhabit them), fire and hail, snow and frost,
winds, mountains and hills, trees (and he doesn’t leave out those that bear fruit), wild animals and cattle, creeping things and flying birds (Psalm 148:7-10). This is quite the choir! Have you ever imagined such an ensemble?! I don’t think this is an all-encompassing list of creation, but he definitely calls out some interesting things – sea monsters is probably my favorite. But our psalmist hits upon several areas of creation, calling out animals, plants, actual parts of the earthly terrain, and even the weather. All of it is to praise the Lord. And in spending so much time on creation, calling out the earth and the sky to worship God, the psalmist pulls our own attention away from ourselves and directs it towards the rest of the world. He takes the focus off human beings or how God is interacting with human life, and says, “creation matters too.” He puts things into perspective for us, reminding us that we are just but a small part of the whole. There is a symphony of praise happening all around us through creation. We just usually fail to see it.

I’ll admit that this is an area in which I struggle. I would imagine that a lot of us do, especially those of us that spend the majority of our days cooped up in an office or in a house. We might throw up a quick word of thanks to God for the nice spring weather during our prayer time, but our interaction with the rest of creation sometimes stops there. We read the psalms and sing the hymns that allude to creation worshipping God, but we don’t spend much time reflecting on the words or taking it a step further and actually noticing creation and hearing the praises it offers. Instead, sometimes only creation taking us by surprise can draw our attention away from our own little world– a beautiful sunset or a striking splash of color from some vibrant flowers; a magical thunderstorm that lights the sky or a beautiful animal running through a field. Sometimes it takes getting smacked in the face by nature for us to actually notice it.

Last summer was one of those times for me. I was up at a cabin in the North Carolina mountains with some dear friends to whom I had spent four years ministering. We had taken a little retreat that weekend as a way to close out my time as their minister. Actually, the last time we had taken such a retreat was when I first started serving that church so in a way, that little mountain retreat had served as our own bookends of praising the Lord together. It’s hard to ignore the beauty of creation when you look around you and all you see are beautiful trees of varying colors, mountains that seem to touch the heavens, perfect blue skies, and the sounds of nature moving to their own rhythm. It was a smack in the face I needed; something to draw me away from all else that occupied my mind and notice the startling beauty and intricacies of this world which God has placed us in.

As if this wasn’t enough to call us out of our preoccupations and notice God’s creation, one evening we gathered outside on the deck because someone remembered that there was to be a meteor shower. I’ve never been one for stargazing, but that night I was. We pulled out pillows and blankets so we could lie on the deck and scan the skies for the shooting stars that would appear so suddenly. I had never seen anything like it. The sky was so perfectly clear, not intruded upon by the buildings of big city life or the pollution we’ve introduced into this world. It was as if we were witnessing the heavens just as God had made them. We laid there silently, knowing that our talking might distract us from paying attention to the chorus before us. And it really was like a chorus, each star praising God and beckoning us to acknowledge the wonder and mystery of God’s creation. It was mesmerizing and it kept us there for all hours of the night, not wanting to miss one note of praise.
The following morning we gathered again on the deck, this time around a table. It was our last morning there and soon we’d be back in the cars headed home, closing the chapter of this time we had spent together. We looked out over the endless wonder before us as we shared communion and sang hymns. It was a picturesque moment of all creation coming alive, us included, and joining in the chorus. That’s what I picture now when I read this psalm. It’s a bit harder, removed from those beautiful mountains, to take note of creation singing its songs of praise, but I try to be more aware; to notice the trees and flowers swaying in the gentle breeze; to pick out the stars burning brightly in the sky; to be still and tone down the hum of my own life so I can hear the sounds of creation. I hope I’m doing a better job at noticing God’s handiwork rather than just the man-made constructions around me. I want to be awed first by God’s own design.

There’s a hymn I remember singing growing up, but I don’t think I’ve heard it or even seen it in a hymnal since my adolescent years. I asked my husband, Charles, if he knew it and he vaguely recalled it from a VBS or kids program, but I know it was at least in the hymnal we used. Clearly it’s not all that common, but perhaps you’ll know it. It’s called “The Trees of the Field” and was written in 1975, hence why it’s not in the older hymnals and not as common. The hymn is based off of the text from Isaiah 55:12 and it’s an upbeat tune with a good driving beat. I’ll spare you my singing voice and just read the text for you:

You shall go out with joy
And be led forth with peace
The mountains and the hills
Will break forth before you,
There’ll be shouts of joy,
And all the trees of the field
Will clap, will clap their hands.

And all the trees of the field
Will clap their hands (there was a little double clap here)
The trees of the field
Will clap their hands (double clap)
The trees of the field
Will clap their hands (double clap)
While you go out with joy.
(Steffi Geiser Rubin & Stuart Dauermann, 1975)

I loved this hymn growing up and every time I’m outside, enjoying the wonders of creation, it comes to mind. I guess its catchy beat and the clapping trees stuck with me all these years. It seems rather silly to think about trees clapping their hands, unless we’re watching a cartoon or reading a children’s book, but that’s what our psalmist is calling for. He’s calling for the trees to clap, for the animals to sing out, for the winds to blow their praise. All creation sings out, offering praise back to the one that gave them existence.

We would do well to listen for creation’s chorus that is ringing out all around us. The first thing it does is draw us out of our own little world. We easily get caught up in our lives and end up thinking that we’re the center of the universe. Probably most troubling is that we don’t even realize it when we’ve become so self-consumed. But creation can call us out of that limited view of the world and then direct our attention to all that God has done and is doing in this world. It can show us how God is still actively creating and working and
we can become lost in wonder as we are awed by the beauty that is before us. I thought about this the other day at the funeral service that honored Joe Swaney. Someone shared a story of Joe pointing out the beauty of a few uncut thistles. Now when I think of thistles, I usually think of spiky plants that Eeyore from Winnie the Pooh ate. I had never given the lovely, intricate pink and purple bloom much thought. I had never really thought about God’s care that went into creating it. That is until I heard the story shared just the other day of when Joe pointed out this beautiful creation to his friend. It makes you stop and wonder how much of God’s marvelous creation we walk by every day without noticing. But creation is at work, calling us out and drawing our attention to God’s wonders. And then if we’re willing to clap our hands with the trees, it invites us to join the chorus.

Our psalmist does the same, finally calling the people to join in on the praises being offered, to sing with the rest of creation. All people are called to praise God. It doesn’t matter your status or gender or age. Clearly there are no limits to who or what can praise God. It’s something we’re all called to do; something we’re all meant to do. And yet, it’s not something that comes easily to all of us. So let me close with a few suggestions for those of us that have to work a bit harder to praise God regularly; for those of us whose expressions of praises to God are often limited to Sunday mornings and the hymns we sing or who struggle to see beyond the immediacy of our own situation.

First off, look around you and see what is happening. Notice creation singing around you. Our psalmist has already begun the work for you, directing you to parts of creation that are offering praises to God in their own particular ways. Pay attention to the swaying trees or the howling wind. Stop and think about the delicate nature of the flowers in your garden or the many types of animals God created. Spend some time watching the stars in the sky or the waters in the lake ripple by. Just go outside and look beyond your own two feet and listen. And look to the other people around you. Look at what is happening in the church or in the community. Try to take the focus off yourself and see God’s handiwork elsewhere in the world.

Secondly, respond in praise from what you’ve seen, what you’ve witnessed in your life. Don’t just offer up empty words on Sunday mornings; don’t just mouth the words of the hymns without really thinking about what you’re singing. Don’t just offer up a quick thanks to God before moving on to your requests when you finally sit down to pray. Empty words of praise are meaningless. God knows when your praises rise from true gratitude, when you are sincere in your worship. So let the things you notice turn into meaningful words of praise. Speak from the ways you’re witnessing God moving and working in the people and things around you.

And lastly, allow it to change you. The more we work at it, the more we try to take the focus off ourselves and turn it toward God - the more it will become a lifestyle rather than a task we have to force ourselves to practice. It’s like anything you practice. The more you work at it, the more natural it will feel. The more we tune out our own self-absorption and give our attention and praises to God, the more we will live that way, actually embodying our praise in the way we live and interact with others. It will change our heart. It will change our behavior. It will change the way we see ourselves in the community and in the church and the way we see others and the rest of creation. It will reveal to us our dependence upon God and our interdependence with creation. It will change the very core of who we are and how we see ourselves in relation to God.
So join the chorus. Listen for creation’s symphony that is already well underway and join in, praising the Lord for his work in this world and in our lives. The trees of the field are clapping their hands and inviting us to join in. Will you live a life of praise to our God, our Creator? Will your years sing out of the wondrous ways in which God is alive and continues to be at work in creation? The decision is yours. Creation is already singing. Amen.