

# A Chorus of Praise – Sermon for Easter VI – April 27, 2008

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## Psalm 148 *Laudate Dominum* (From the Book of Common Prayer)

- 1 Hallelujah!  
Praise the LORD from the heavens; \*  
praise him in the heights.
- 2 Praise him, all you angels of his; \*  
praise him, all his host.
- 3 Praise him, sun and moon; \*  
praise him, all you shining stars.
- 4 Praise him, heaven of heavens, \*  
and you waters above the heavens.
- 5 Let them praise the Name of the LORD; \*  
for he commanded, and they were created.
- 6 He made them stand fast for ever and ever; \*  
he gave them a law which shall not pass away.
- 7 Praise the LORD from the earth, \*  
you sea-monsters and all deeps;
- 8 Fire and hail, snow and fog, \*  
tempestuous wind, doing his will;
- 9 Mountains and all hills, \*  
fruit trees and all cedars;
- 10 Wild beasts and all cattle, \*  
creeping things and wingèd birds;
- 11 Kings of the earth and all peoples, \*  
princes and all rulers of the world;
- 12 Young men and maidens, \*  
old and young together.
- 13 Let them praise the Name of the LORD, \*  
for his Name only is exalted,  
his splendor is over earth and heaven.
- 14 He has raised up strength for his people  
and praise for all his loyal servants, \*  
the children of Israel, a people who are near him.  
Hallelujah!

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus, who is the Christ.

I would like to begin by sharing an experience from my time as a staff Chaplain at Ohio State University Hospitals. One late night, I received a call to meet a family at the hospital emergency room. The circumstances were particularly tragic; a young woman had been the victim of a random shooting and was in critical condition. And so upon arriving, I sat with the family for several hours waiting for news; listening as the parents and siblings shared their grief, trials and even a few happy memories. After a little while other family began to arrive and there was one aunt in particular who immediately began to admonish the parents for not having enough faith. I cringed and struggled as this very well meaning woman went on and on and on about how we as Christians are supposed to praise God in all circumstances.

I will come back to this.

This morning I would like to focus on Psalm 148, which is the Psalm appointed for today, the sixth Sunday after Easter. The Book of Psalms is a collection of songs, or song texts. There are many different types of songs in this collection, including songs of lament, abandonment and anger; songs of wisdom; songs which recount God's saving works through history; and songs of celebration and praise. Our Psalm for today is a song of praise. In fact, Psalm 148 is part of a set of Psalms – numbers 146 through 150, which together form a doxology or a final glorious song of praise to the great book of Psalms. Each of these five Psalms begins with an exclamation – a joyous shout: Halleluiah! This literally means “Praise be to Yahweh,” or Praise the Lord! And then proceeds with a chorus of praise.

And who is to join this chorus of praise? Well Psalm 148 actually specifies that there should be two choirs. In music appreciation we would call this a “polychoral” work. Choir # 1 consists of the angelic host, the sun, the moon, the shining stars, and even all of heaven itself. Choir # 2 is to include the sea-monsters from the deep, fire, hail, snow, fog, tempestuous wind, the mountains, hills, fruit trees, cedars, wild beasts, cattle, creeping things, birds, kings and princes and rulers, and all people, men and women, young and old. Now that is quite a chorus!

In short, all of creation is to join the chorus of praise. In the creation account in the 1<sup>st</sup> chapter of Genesis after each day, God surveys His work of creation and declares it is good. And so, all of this Good Creation is to join the polychoral song of praise to God!

OK, so it is clear who is called to praise – it is also clear from the Psalm that praise is to be the primary calling of all creation. All the heavens, plants, creatures and you and me are all called to make praise the first and foremost priority of our lives. We are to praise God in everything we do and in every circumstance.

But how? How are we to do this? What about those times when we don't feel like praise? Or when the circumstances are filled with loss and despair, like the situation I began this sermon with. How can we praise God then – in those circumstances? We need to look closer at this question of how exactly do we praise God?

A few years ago, while I was serving St. John's Lutheran Church, I attended a worship conference on alternative musical resources for worship. The first scheduled event was an evening concert presented by the Maranatha! Praise band, which was out of Nashville. The music was very upbeat, filled with praise and celebrations. But early on I noticed a few people in the audience starting to raise their hands and wave them about as if they were trying to get the band's attention. My initial reaction was to think, "gee, I really don't think they are going to take questions in the middle of a concert." And then it dawned on me: that they weren't raising their hands to ask question, but as an expression of praise.

This is a valid way of expressing praise. Raising our hands, singing, shouting, dancing, all has its place. But that is not the whole story. I think in our society, where often religious dialogue and expression is dictated by one or two traditions, we have developed the idea that this is how you have to praise God; that praise also requires faith and thanksgiving and joy. And that praise isn't possible without these things. Well, that is simply not true. That is one valid expression of praise. But not even the most important or common one.

Remember, people make up only a tiny part of the choir. How do the sea-monsters, the cattle, the wild beasts and the winged birds fulfill their obligation to praise God? How do the tempestuous winds and the mountains manage their polychoral parts in the choir? "The problem we have in understanding praise is that we are accustomed to seeing praise as a special offering – a prayer or a song or certain behaviors or attitudes. We relegate praise to a certain time and place... But the praise of the Lord in this psalm is more than what happens at a special time or place. Verse 6 is a clue to what is understood by praise in the psalm. 'The Lord established the heavenly (and earthly) things forever, and fixed their purpose and place in creation.' In other words the stormy wind fulfills its task of praise by being a stormy wind. All creatures praise the Lord by being the creatures the Lord made them. This is true also of the Lord's people\*... " We are joining in the chorus of praise as we go about living our lives as faithfully as we can. We don't have to be in a certain frame of mind. We just have to go about living our lives in way that are faithful to our calling. In the case of the family I spoke of earlier, the appropriate and natural expressing of grief, sorrow, fear and anger, were an expression of praise. This is what the Aunt didn't understand. That by giving full voice to sorrow, grief, even anger – this is praise – this is being faithful! In fact, I would go so far as to say that to deny these natural expressions and emotions, which are a natural part of life, would display a lack of faith. We praise God most faithfully when we accept who we are and the wonderful gift of being fully human.

One final thought. Today is Rogation Sunday, which is when we focus on the natural environment and God's glorious creation. Psalm 148 is explicitly clear that we

are fellow choir members with all of God's natural world, who, also in order to fulfill their calling to praise, must be allowed to be what they were created to be as well. In as much as we are called to cherish who God wants us to be, so also we must cherish all dimensions of God's creation so that together we can all join in the glorious polychoral song of praise to God.

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\* Exegetical article The Old Testament Readings: Weekly Comments on the Revised Common Lectionary, Howard Wallace Audrey Schindler, Morag Logan, Paul Tonson, Lorraine Parkinson, Theological Hall of the Uniting Church, Melbourne, Australia.  
<http://www.textweek.com/writings/psalm148.htm>