

Ellen Davis, who teaches Old Testament at Duke Divinity School, has said that:

...the main reason to preach Psalms is not the bare fact that they contain great lines or great metaphors. Rather, it is because the poets who composed them thought differently about God, and more deeply.

*The psalmists thought differently about God, and more deeply...* In Psalm 148, the poet uses the Hebrew phrase *hallelu-yah* no less than twelve times. *Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!* “Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!” In fact, the last five psalms of Israel’s songbook—psalms 146-150—all make abundant use of that word. They are like that section in our *Hymnal* where the Easter hymns are located, and after the forty-days of Lent (when we can contain ourselves no longer) we burst forth in a chorus of hallelujahs:

- Alleluia, Alleluia, Give thanks to the risen Lord, Alleluia, Alleluia, Give praise to his name;
- or-
- Jesus Christ is risen today, alleluia; our triumphant holy day, alleluia; who did once upon the cross, alleluia; suffer to redeem our loss, alleluia!

What the poet who wrote Psalm 148 grasps is that creatures relate best to their Creator through praise. Walter Brueggemann says that this summons to praise in Psalm 148 imagines all of creation, the whole cosmos, as a worshiping congregation. Sun and moon and stars and sea-monsters and fire and hail and tempestuous wind and all cattle and creeping things are all there, all part of one big Hallelujah Chorus and all focused on one thing: praising God from whom all blessings flow!

Praise can never be coerced or forced or manipulated. You can’t guilt someone into praise. You can guilt them into going to church or into doing the right thing; but praise comes from the heart. Praise flows from the deepest place in our souls, that good and holy part of us that is created in God’s own image and knows that life is a gift. This great ecological hymn of praise tries to capture that.

Not every day of our lives feels like that, of course. The journey of faith includes some days when we must walk through the valley of the shadow of death. On any given weekend as we gather in this place to make our song, some of us come with heavy hearts, and carrying heavy burdens. A few alleluias don’t necessarily make all of that better. But what they can do is point us toward the dawn of a new day. They can instill hope as they remind us that we will make our song again. Sometimes I think we need to be here especially when we are not feeling particularly able to join the song of praise, so that others can carry the melody for us a while; so that we will not forget the song...until by God’s grace we can sing again. This is why we need community, because there are times when it is hard to sing our lives.

Grief and pain are real, there is no doubt about that. But I sometimes wonder how many days we miss an opportunity for praise for other reasons, less legitimate reasons. Perhaps because we are just too anxious about earthly things or too worried about tomorrow, which we can't control anyway. Perhaps because we're traveling so fast that we miss what is right before our very eyes. Perhaps because we are sweating the small stuff and forgetting the main thing.

Jesus, like the poets who wrote the psalms, thought about God differently and more deeply—and he invited his followers to do the same. In the spirit of Israel's poets, he invited us to consider the lilies of the field and the birds of the air who do not toil. They simply praise their Maker in their own native tongues: *Laudate dominium*, as we might sing in Latin. Hallelujah, in Hebrew! Praise God, in English!

So this psalm really is an inspired choice for the Feast of St. Francis, one of the great followers of Jesus in his day, and our namesake in this parish. It's the psalm Francis chose as the basis for his own canticle of praise and no doubt it was the way he lived his life. *All creatures of our God and king...lift up your voices, let us sing: Alleluia! Alleluia!*

Our friend, St. Francis, was born one of seven children to Pietro and Pico di Bernardone. At his Baptism he was given the name Giovanni—John—after *Giovanni the Baptist*. But his father, a successful businessman, nicknamed him “Francesco” after his beloved France, where he did a fair amount of business travel. While they were a religious family (especially Francesco's mother) the expectation was still clear: Pietro hoped that one day this son would join him in the family business. He most definitely did not encourage his son to become a monk! So imagine the old man's dismay when Francesco broke it to him that he believed God had other plans for him. Everything we know about that relationship between father and son reminds us that before he was a statue in our gardens, he was a real flesh and blood person, with all of the challenges and joys and heartache that are part of the deal of being human and of being part of a family.

Francis also did time on the battle field, in war. He struggled and faced hardship and the realities of life not so different from our world. Eventually, though, Francesco decided to give up all of his worldly possessions in order to gain Christ. So there on the town green in Assisi he took his clothes off and began again, naked as the day he came into this world—without even the shirt on his back to call his own.

He found, I think, that all that stuff got in the way of him living life in a posture of praise to God. And I wonder if that doesn't happen that way with us sometimes as well. Most of us won't bear witness to God's love in the radical way Francis did. And I'm not recommending that we all leave this church today and go take off all our clothes over by the Senior Center, although I'm sure that would create quite a stir. But most of us are not destined to become statues in gardens with butterflies and birds flitting around us either. Even so, we are called to be followers of Jesus and Francis models for us a way of letting go, and living toward God in praise. Like the poet who wrote Psalm 148, so also did Francis “think differently about God, and more deeply.”

When you orient your life to God in praise, even death can become a gentle friend. All creatures of our God and king become part of one big family as brother sun and sister moon join in the

Hallelujah Chorus with us. And when that happens, by God's grace what we really do discover is that hoarding our stuff not only doesn't lead to eternal life, it doesn't even lead to life here on earth—because we start to worry that we'll lose that to which we so desperately cling. When we live our lives in praise we really do discover that it is in giving that we receive. It isn't just a command to be generous that makes us more generous but our experience that this is what brings meaning to our lives, and hope to the world.

This weekend, in the context of our patronal feast, we have a lot going on. As we baptize Kennedy Dow, we are all put in mind of the waters of Baptism that first called us into one Body. We will also commission this year's confirmation class—which really means that are inviting them and their mentors into a year-long process of reflecting on, and trying to more faithfully live into, this same Baptismal Covenant. We are trying, as a faith community, to help them to find the same gift of joy and wonder in all God's works that we promise to show Kennedy, as we ourselves do our very best to find joy and wonder in all God's works every day. We also remember the saints who have gone before us this weekend, particularly giving thanks for the lives and ministries of those whose ashes are interred in our Memorial Garden. Truly we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses! And, of course, we will be blessing animals on Sunday afternoon at 3 p.m in that same Memorial Garden—the culmination of a great celebration of a beloved saint. Bring all creatures great and small, who teach us by virtue of being who they are, how to praise God.

We all know that there are times in our lives when praise is really hard, and none of us escape this life without days like that. But even then, and maybe especially on those hard days, it does us a world of good to go out and take our cues from God's amazing creation. When God appears to Job out of the whirlwind and Job says, "why me, Lord?" God doesn't explain to Job why innocent people suffer in this world. Rather, he says something like this:

Go take a hike, Job. I mean it, literally! Go see the Grand Canyon. Look up at the stars on a clear night. Get thee to a high mountain. Go on a whale watch so you can observe Leviathan, that I made just for the sport of it. Check it out, Job—it's a big amazing and wonderful world. Not perfect, I know; I'm still working out some of the kinks! But it's still good and beautiful and amazing and I hope you can see that all creatures are tilted toward praise, bent toward the Creator of the heavens and earth. And perhaps if you really do listen to the songs of the birds of the air and consider the flowers of the field, you too, will once again find your bearings. That's the best I can do Job—just keep singing: Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!

"The main reason to preach Psalms," Professor Davies says (and I would add the main reason to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them as a congregation!) *is not the bare fact that they contain great lines or great metaphors. Rather, it is because the poets who composed them thought differently about God, and more deeply.* That's what Francis did and because of that we call him a saint. He wasn't perfect; none of the saints are. But they see God differently, and more deeply. They live their lives in response to the God who created the heavens and the earth; living their lives oriented toward praise and gratitude. May we be a people who are learning to do the same, with God's help. *Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!*