

The Fifth Sunday of Easter
Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Weather. It is a pretty harmless topic of conversation. It's something we all have experienced. When talking about it you can compare differences or similarities geographically, say weather at the lake verses Wick Park or larger differences like those across the country or globe. Weather is something that has a great impact on our daily life. It helps keep us alive and it also has the power to kill us. Weather is important.

I think today's psalm praises God for the weather because of the influence it has on our lives. Hail, snow, frost, and stormy wind are all mentioned, but the Psalmist also opens it up wider. The psalmist commands all things to praise to God - the sun, the moon, mountains, hills, wild animals, and birds. The psalmist makes a list of things that are called to praise God from invisible angels, to celestial bodies like the sun and moon, to humans of all walks of life. It's a fairly expansive list that, while not exhaustive in length, does provide us some interesting spiritual exploration today.

One interesting aspect is that humans are at the end of the list. Heck, if we cut out two little verses humanity would be missing all together. As humans we can be pretty selfish at times. We can easily fall into a self-centered, center-of-the-world, borderline narcissistic mentality if we're not careful. The Psalmist reminds us with this list that, as one theologian puts it, "The act of praise presents a wonderful gift to the one doing the praising. It takes the focus off of ourselves." Praise is an action, not an idea. The act of praise inherently thwarts the cycle of selfishness. Praise takes the question: "what's in this for me?" and says, "Hey, it's not always about you!" Praise opens up our minds to thankfulness and gratefulness that goes beyond our tiny lives to illuminate the expansiveness of creation. Praise functions to expand our understanding of the world so that we become more self-aware and more grateful.¹

¹ Brosend, William F. *Feasting on the Word*. "Fifth Sunday of Easter: Psalm 148 – homiletical perspective."

Praise is like that link on social media or in an email titled something like “7 facts that will make you feel very small.” It usually starts by placing us on the Earth. Then it zooms out telling us that we spin around the sun which is just one of at least 100 *billion* stars in the Milky Way galaxy alone. Then we’re reminded that there are over 100 billion galaxies. Sometimes these articles or videos go on to remind us about the size of things. They show us that the earth is super small compared to the sun, noting that if the sun were like our home’s front door the earth would be the size of a nickel. The idea of this list or video is to make you feel smaller and smaller in the universe. At the same I’m also reminded of the beauty and expansiveness of creation. I’m reminded that all of these things are beautiful gifts that are influenced by one another. I’m also reminded, in the words of the Psalmist, to give praise to God. All of creation – planets, stars, dark matter, clouds, birds, dogs, cats, children, parents, grandparents, and so much more give praise to God. It’s a wonderful reminder that we are but a small part of the vastness of creation. Sometimes we need to hear “it’s not all about you,” and that’s one function of praise.

Yet, I have a feeling that if I would have submitted today's psalm as an assignment on praise in grad school, I'd probably fail the assignment. I can already hear Volf saying, "I think there is an excellent main point here, namely that all things should praise God. However, where's a counterpoint and a rebuttal?" It doesn't take but a moment of thought to present the counterpoint to the psalmist's argument. What about the weather events like hurricane Katrina? Surely this cannot give praise to God. How about earthquakes that kill, tsunamis that destroy livelihoods, cold weather that freezes the elderly, changing ocean temperatures that kill coral reefs, and the list goes on. How do these things praise God? Taking a step back from the weather we could list off indifference to creation, environmental exploitation, pollution, corruption, gun violence, fraud, global warming, any -ism you want, and again the list goes on. Counter-point established. There's no written rebuttal to this counter-point, so it looks like the psalmist is failing systematic theology. Then where do we turn for the psalmists' rebuttal? Well, the rest of the readings of course!

In the reading from Revelation we see a *new* heaven and a *new* earth, and the sea is no more. Now, pause. Sea – this is an important word. Think back to the first book of the Bible, Genesis, and there was a spirit that hovered over the waters or hovered over the sea. At that moment all of creation was a chaotic and formless void. Throughout all of creation God is making order out of chaos. God orders light from dark, sky from sea, and land from water. This order making is what makes us type A-people believers in a God! Praise God for the label maker! Here in the very last book of our scriptures we now have a new earth without the chaotic sea. We have a city that comes down from heaven and this is the home of God among all people. While we started in a garden in Genesis we now end in a city in Revelation. In both that garden and in the new city God's presence is emphasized, yet in between Genesis and Revelation we hear stories of how God appears distant from us. Time and again we'll see the God is found in unexpected people, in odd places, and in awkward moments throughout the scriptures. You see there's a fundamental shift from the beginning to the end of the scriptures. This shift is so important for us Christians. It's a shift in how we understand God's new way of being is being among us – in the midst of the hurricanes, tsunamis, and earthquakes. God is among us bringing together all people by reconciling all creation. No more do the unexpected and horrible things drive us apart, but instead they become places where we can experience God's presence in the world.

In John's gospel it's dirty feet that become that place where we experience God. When Jesus kneels at the feet of his disciples, there Jesus gives them a new command, a command for this new city, for this place without chaos. Jesus' command is to love one another. Jesus says that people will know that you are my disciples, that people will know that you follow me, that people will know that you are Christian because of how you love. But you know what, we as Christians find so many other ways to justify who is a believer or who isn't a believer. We ask if they believe the same creedal formula. We inquire if they give enough time and money to church. We push them to volunteer more. We question if they have they been a member long enough to make decisions. But the fact is, those are not the marks of a Christ-follower. A Christ-follower is one who loves – not in that pop music, romantic comedy kind of love. Rather it's the kind of love that looks like a 40-year-old man feeding his incapacitated 80-year-old father in a Chicago diner. Love is when that son scoops up the food from his father's face time and again. Or it's like that passionate person from a different neighborhood who protests gentrification or the placement of a power plant next to a south side school. That is love.

What does this all have to do with the psalmists' rebuttal? How do *all* things praise God? This is a hard rebuttal. I personally have sat at far too many bedsides with grieving parents of their stillborn child with well-meaning people saying that God needed another angel. I have seen too many young bodies filled with bullets while a friend comforts the mother saying it was God's plan. Now, I can live into this theology if it's helpful to others, but I don't buy it. I wonder if bad things just happen. Why? It's life. You see, when I try to explain why things happen, I'm never satisfied. I never have the right answer. I think the psalmist's point, though, is that standing in the midst of all the things of life we look to find something to praise. This is not to argue that we should ignore our grief – we *should* feel all our emotions and mourn. Even Jesus wept. Yet at the same we look to find a song of love in the midst of the dirges of life. We look towards the crappy, horrible situations of life and we look for resurrection. That's what this season of Easter is about. There were things beyond Jesus' control as he was betrayed, framed, unjustly tried, abused, and crucified. That wasn't the end of the story. Easter and resurrection are about finding God's presence in the midst of that – it's about finding that death cannot overcome love. It's about knowing that although bad things happen they cannot stop us from loving one another. That is the message of Easter. That's what our entire mission and Christian identity is about love.

Today we look at the world and praise God for this beautiful day, and for the rain the waters the flowers, and for the huge sun that brings life, and for the people we encounter. We look beyond ourselves in praise to God. Then with this transcendent view we can embrace a love that knows no bounds. We can honor a love that means that God comes to be in relationship with us. We praise our God who is not abstract, but among us. Our God is the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end. Our God is love. Friends, on this eco-Sunday go into the world to share God's love with others. Give thanks for all of creation, and then be mindful of how you tread on the earth. For everything is a gift of love, so go and share that love. Amen.