

Ascribe to God

INTRODUCTION

We are entering the longest season of the Christian Year, the Sundays after Pentecost, or what is also called Ordinary Time. For many, it feels rather ordinary, week after week of the long spring and summer and even into the early fall season. It is the time when attendance patterns shift, and folks find it hard to maintain a regular weekly presence. Ordinary. Yet, it could be argued that this season is where our faith gets put to the test. From Advent through Pentecost Sunday, we are walking with Jesus, learning and growing and inviting alongside him, observing and listening as he makes his earthly journey. Then on Pentecost, the church takes the stage and seeks to live out all that has been learned as we show to the world what living in the kingdom looks like.

We don't walk alone, however, which is why the first series of this long season is about the God we proclaim. We want to keep a proper perspective as we live out our faith and realize that while our efforts are important, it is by the grace of God that we can be the church we are called to be. Even here, in the season after Pentecost, we ascribe to God all the glory, all the wonder, all the joy that is within us. To help us in that task, we turn to the songbook of the Hebrew scriptures and listen to the assigned psalms. But we begin with Isaiah's knee-knocking encounter in the presence of the God we worship. Join us, as together we look to the source and sustenance of our faith.

Trinity Sunday – All-Consuming Presence

May 26, 2024

[Isaiah 6:1-8](#)

Color – White

PLANNING NOTES

How often do we plan and show up to worship expecting to encounter God? It feels like the *right* answer should be, "Every week!" But, in reality, I'm sure many of us would prefer not to be scared witless by the glory of God as Isaiah was in today's passage. Or, at the very least, we'd like some warning so we can be prepared! And yet, isn't that at least part of what worship planning is about, showing up and expecting to encounter God? We certainly believe that God is ever-present, so shouldn't worship be about learning to recognize God's presence among us?

As terrifying as aspects of Isaiah's call story may seem, Isaiah's experience is instructive for our approach to worship planning and leadership at all times, but perhaps most especially on this Trinity Sunday. The whole encounter begins with Isaiah *showing up* at the temple. So, consider taking some time to welcome and orient the congregation toward showing up to God's presence in their midst. Acknowledge all that we bring with us into worship, the burdens and joys and everything in between, and attune the gathered body toward God's presence with them even as they have come to be present to God and one another.

Then, just as the seraphs sing to one another the truth of God's holiness, invite the congregation to also sing and tell one another the truth of God's holiness in their lives. Certainly, that may include beloved hymns and songs like "Holy, Holy, Holy" (*United Methodist Hymnal*, 64), "Maker, in Whom We Live" (*United Methodist Hymnal*, 88), or "Santo, Santo, Santo" (*The Faith We Sing*, 2007), "Glory to God/Gloria a Dios" (*The Faith We Sing*, 2033), or "Holy Is the Lord" (*Worship and Song*, 3028), but it might also include a prayer of confession or intercession that recalls for those gathered God's presence that surrounds us in love and reminds us, like Isaiah, who we are and how we are to live in the world.

Isaiah's vision in the temple also reminds us that encountering God leads to calling. So, as we begin this long season after Pentecost, consider crafting an invitation to discipleship that gives congregants time and space to listen for God's calling, to respond, and then to listen for what God is sending them to do. Orient the congregation to enter Ordinary Time as a season for inquiry and exploration, for discernment and experimentation, for committing to a life of discipleship, and for discovering how God's all-consuming presence calls, prepares, and empowers us to participate in bringing about the kin-dom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

PREACHING NOTES

Standing on the rim of the Grand Canyon, climbing up Lookout Mountain in the Smokies, settling into your seat at the Broadway show you've been longing to see, walking up the path to meet a relative you didn't know you had, Isaiah finding himself in the throne room of heaven in the presence of the Lord of creation. Awe-inspiring, terrifying, humbling, overwhelming. It's easy to make false equivalences, but capturing something of Isaiah's experience is not impossible for us. Observing the glories of creation can usher a person of faith into the presence of the Creator. Encountering a powerful artistic expression designed to bring us into a new way of seeing the world can be a transformative revelation akin to the new life we experience in Christ. And leaning into the relationships that can form us, with new members of the family, or deeper connections through marriage or adoption, can give us a taste of the kin-dom or beloved community that Jesus envisions so powerfully for us.

Again, let's not assume that these experiences are the same as what Isaiah encountered in the presence of God. However, a careful reading of our text will reveal that his meeting was hardly face-to-face. Instead, the presence is "high and lifted up," and Isaiah sees only the hem of the robe, which fills the temple. We have detailed descriptions of the beings that flew around this presence, but nothing of significance of what Isaiah actually saw of the Lord. Maybe he didn't want to say, cautious about making an idol of his words. Or perhaps he was simply too overwhelmed to come up with ways to describe the presence before him. Or, most likely, God was careful not to reveal too much in this vision, as with Moses on the mountain when God hedged on the whole "face-to-face" thing out of protection for the frailty of humanity, we might assume.

Whatever he saw was enough to shake him to his core. "Woe is me," he cries. Woe. There was nothing threatening being said, it seems. There was no overt action that would cause him to cower for protection. Remember, the whole burning hot coals to the lips came after this confession. There was just this ... presence. Or perhaps, Presence.

Something about that Presence drove him to his knees. If it isn't a threat, then what might it have been? Love. Forgive the cliché. But that's what is at work here. Isaiah is overwhelmed by the love of the Creator. We normally assume that experiencing such love would bring us warm and fuzzy feelings. But the biblical witness tells us that the first experience in such an encounter is a profound feeling of unworthiness. "Woe is me," proclaims the prophet, "for I am a man of unclean lips and yet have been given a glimpse of the glory of God." That God would allow him into the throne room, into the temple of God's presence, is simply too much.

But if the presence is so overwhelming, what will he do when the call is issued? This wasn't a social call, come and visit the holy one for tea and biscuits. No, there is a reason why he is here. Vocation, the calling of the prophet. Here, preacher, pay attention. Isaiah was overwhelmed by the presence of God but daring to speak – "I am a man of unclean lips" – God's own words to God's own people would have destroyed him completely. That is why we need cleansing. Something had to happen so that he could move beyond the feeling of unworthiness and be able to stand and say, "Here am I, send me!"

It is one thing to be aware of the Presence in an amazing encounter or mountaintop experience, it is quite another to be guided every day by that same Presence. To become familiar with and open to God's all-consuming Presence is a lifelong discipleship journey. Knowing and serving God are two sides of the same experience. Some start with the knowing; after some profound experience of God's presence, they then move into a state of willingness to serve, to be sent. Others start with serving and then discover the God they are serving in the act itself, seeing God through those with whom they minister. Either way, it can be a humbling and energizing experience.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

God, sometimes we show up to worship ready to encounter your presence.

We know you are always with us.

Sometimes we catch glimpses of you at home, work, or school—in a smile, in a gentle breeze, in the joy of being together.

We know you are always with us.

But God, we hesitate to encounter you in all of your glory, afraid to be overwhelmed by your love and holiness.

And yet, we know you are always with us in the fullness of your glory.

Ready our hearts today to encounter more of your glory, your love, holiness, and glory that is always present with us.

We come today to enter the dance of the all-consuming presence of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, February 2024.

Prayer for the Day

God, our loving God,
you are the Surprise from whom all discoveries grow,
the Delight of whom each victory sings,
the Joy to whom all lasting pleasures flow,
the Search out of whom all science springs,
the Truth who surfaces when all seems lost,
the Love who will not count the cost.

Creating God, high beyond our understanding,
we worship your mystery!

Redeeming God, deep beyond our deserving,
we worship your mystery!

Inspiring God, near beyond our perceiving,
we worship your mystery!

Amen!

And again we say Amen!

Written by Bruce Prewer, posted at <http://www.bruceprewer.com/DocB/BTRINITYSUNDAY.htm>.

Prayer of Confession

O God,
You are holy,
and deep within ourselves
where our souls touch the ground,
where our being meets your being,
we are on holy ground
and your holiness surrounds us
and calls our name.

Your holiness is your goodness,

your generosity towards us
and the silence which waits
and hopes and is glad
and disappointed - and waits.

You wait to meet us,
to make us holy with your holiness,
to make us loving with your love,
to make us hopeful with your hope.

In your presence, we bow our heads
in shame where we have failed others,
failed ourselves and failed you.
Touch us with the tenderness of your forgiveness.

In your presence, we breathe new life
when we dare to be still, to be centered,
to be whole, to be holy.

Set us free to be holy.
Set us free to be for ourselves a place
where sacredness is joy and peace.
And let us be a sacred space for others
and make sacredness for them.

Dwell in us as in a holy temple,
that we may know stillness
and that we may sense the fragrance of your love
and bring that fragrance to
where life is a stench and putrid and stale,

within ourselves and within our world.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Written by William Loader, posted at <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/reflectiveindex.html>.
Re-posted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2012/05/prayer-gods-holiness.html>.

Benediction

Go now in the blessed presence of the Triune God who cleanses you, calls you, and empowers you to be messengers of God's love in this world even as you are surrounded by God's all-consuming presence wherever you go. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, February 2024.

Second Sunday after Pentecost – All-Knowing Creator

June 2, 2024

[Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18](#)

Color – Green

PLANNING NOTES

In the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas commented that in theology, we study God and all things related to God (*Summa Theologica*, I.1.7; my summary). To that end, having a whole worship series that focuses on the doctrine of God may seem unnecessary, since everything we do in worship is either about God or things related to God. And yet, the mystery of God deserves our attention in worship. So often we pray and sing and preach in worship in an attempt to make sense of things—the difficulties in our world, the miracles of God's provision, how to faithfully respond to difficult situations and questions. But worship is also a place to join together in our wondering, to wade into the mysterious waters of our faith and trust that whatever else we find, God is there.

Of course, this week's psalm invites us to recognize that we are also a mystery to ourselves. So, how do we invite people to enter into the mystery of themselves as well as the mystery of God? Perhaps begin with singing *and* reading the assigned verses from Psalm 139 together. This might look like singing a setting of the whole psalm (*United Methodist Hymnal*, 854) or singing a hymn that references Psalm 139, such as "God the Sculptor of the Mountains" (*The Faith We Sing*, 2060) or "All My Days" (*Worship and Song*, 3011). But then, also take time to read Psalm 139 together, maybe even a couple of different versions. The beauty of the Psalms is that they are theology presented in poetry and song, and reading multiple translations can help pull out different meanings and artistry within the text.

Also consider how connecting with creation assists us in searching out—and being searched out by—our all-knowing Creator. Bring signs of creation into the space. Fill the altar with all of the colors and textures you find outside in your context. Use fabric to mimic the blue of the sky or the blue-green of the rivers. Take time in worship to look out the windows or the doors. Take time to hear the songs of

birds and the clamor of movement and life happening outside. Remind everyone that we encounter the Creator in creation.

And finally, affirm with and for one another that we are all fearfully and wonderfully made. Make this a prayer and blessing that we gift to one another because we are, first and foremost, given the gift of life from God, our Creator. But also, perhaps being fearfully and wonderfully made is not just an affirmation, but an invitation—an invitation to join God in searching and knowing. Searching and knowing ourselves, yes, but also searching and knowing God, because we are fearfully and wonderfully made by the all-knowing Creator who beckons us to dive deeper and deeper into knowledge of and relationship with God, self, one another, and all creation.

PREACHING NOTES

“Search me.” I don’t know if we say that anymore. “Search me!” That shows you how far out of coolness I am these days. Ah, well. But I remember saying it all the time. “Search me.” It has probably been replaced by the ubiquitous “whatever” by now. “Search me.”

It was an “I don’t know” kind of thing. It was an admission of ignorance and maybe complacency. “Search me.” It refers to what we don’t know. And the list of what we don’t know is rather long—starting with ourselves and moving on to ... well, almost everything. In this first after-Pentecost series, we are looking at God. Better yet, we are studying God; we are analyzing God; we are, in short, doing theology. Cool. What do you know about God? What do you think about God? What do you believe about God? Search me.

One of the problems the church has these days, some think, is that we are no longer sure what we believe. We want to move beyond a childish faith, and we want to incorporate all that human beings have learned about how the world works - and how we work - and yet we keep being told that what we’ve learned about the world can’t fit into what we believe about God. They don’t match; they bump up against each other, and something has got to go. Unfortunately, for most of us, what has gone is diligent theological thought. That isn’t the same as saying that we’ve lost our faith. We just don’t think about it all that much anymore. We can’t make it work, so we don’t bother. What do you believe about God? Search me. That’s what many have come to these days. It is just easier. Search me.

Of course, “search me” is also used in another way. The way that Psalm 139 uses it. And maybe it is that searching or the acknowledgment of God’s searching that might help us reclaim our faith as a reasonable part of our existence. Faith can be reasonable? Does that make sense? Search me.

No, wait. I didn’t mean that. Of course, it can. We think about our faith. We declare our faith. We even itemize our faith. Let’s consider, for example, the opening statement in the Apostles’ Creed. We could look at the articles of religion tucked away in our *Discipline*, but let’s go simpler. We believe in God, the Father, the Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.

Luke Timothy Johnson, a biblical scholar, presents in his book simply called ***The Creed*** that faith is an existential response of the whole person characterized by trust, obedience, and loyalty (faith is what we do, not simply what we think). Johnson writes that he “has come to appreciate how critical the role of belief is in structuring that response.” (Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Creed: What Christians Believe and*

Why it Matters, Darton Longman & Todd, 2003, vii.) In other words, if faith is about doing, our doing has to be driven by our believing. And the church is the “gathering of those committed by faith to a radical response to God.” But that response, Johnson argues, grows out of a communal sense of identity that is hard to grow without something like a creed.

A creed, then, is a statement of belief that defines us as a community of faith. It identifies us for ourselves and for the world at large. We are the people who believe. And because we believe, we live, we serve, we act, we love.

The problem with starting with the doctrine of God is that it is, in the end, too large a subject to grasp in its entirety. Every statement, every image, every description about God is only a part of the whole. And the whole is beyond our reach, which is exactly what the psalmist says. The psalm ends with an admission that knowing all of God is beyond us. But it begins with the affirmation that being known by God is the nature of the relationship. In fact, the essence of the psalm is the declaration that the only knowledge of God accessible is in relationship.

The Apostles’ Creed reminds us that we call God, Father. This is not to reduce God to a human role but to lift humans by acknowledging that the parenting role is a part of the divine. So, whether we are father or mother, whether we care for birth children or adopted children or children baptized into the family of God, we reflect an aspect of God. We believe that God cares, and so we do too.

The creed also reminds us that God is creator and that all of creation has a single point of origin. However, we understand that creation to have taken place, we worship God as the creator of all there is. We can argue methodology, and we do, but there need be no conflict with the article of faith that claims God as creator.

The creed echoes the psalm with a single word – “Almighty.” What does that mean? Search me. No, wait. It means that there is more to God than I can grasp with my understanding. It means that I trust in the power of God, even when I can’t sense it. It means I believe in the power of God, even when it seems God has lost a grip on the world God created. It means I will spend my days seeking evidence of that power and that presence with confidence and hope.

O Lord, you have searched me, and known me. Let me in my own small way return the favor.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Call to Worship

The psalmist declares, “Lord, you have searched me and known me.” Will you open yourselves to be searched by God?

Search us, O God, and know our hearts.

God searches you, knows you, and loves you, and invites you to search out God in return. Will you seek the heart of God?

We will search you, O God, to know your heart.

The Triune God who creates all and knows all is revealed in running rivers and fluttering butterflies, in warm sunshine and the smell of the earth. Will you pay attention?

We will pay attention, O God, to your fingerprint of love on all of creation.

Open our hearts today to encounter your love, holiness, and glory that create and sustain all that was, is, and will be.

We come today to enter the dance of the Trinity, the all-knowing Creator and Sustainer of life.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, February 2024.

Prayer for the Day

A Prayer of Thanksgiving (Ps. 139)

God, we cannot escape your love. We can find no place to hide. You search us out wherever we may be. Your love is like a mother's blanket, protecting us wherever we go. Your love shields us from evil. We may travel to the moon or to the depths of the ocean: your love is there. We may think ourselves to greater levels of sophistication: your love is there. We may fall in the pits of sin: your love is there.

Thank you, Mother, for steadfast mercy.

Thank you for being there, wherever we may be. Amen.

Written by John H. Danner in *Touch Holiness: Resources for Worship, Updated*, ed. Ruth C. Duck and Maren C. Tirabassi (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2012), 277.

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Prayer of Confession

I come before God knowing that "confession is good for the soul." But the thought of opening up before you is overwhelming. At times, I cannot bear to remember how often I have gone astray. At other times, I cloud my memory, justifying what I know is wrong in your sight. I cannot trust myself to confess my sins as often as I should. I need you to help me to be honest. So, like the psalmist, I say, "Search me Lord." You know me. You know my thoughts. You know where I have been and where I am going. Search me, Lord; and if there is any wicked way in me, deliver me and lead me into righteousness.

Offer prayers of silent confession.

Receive these words of assurance. The Lord is slow to anger and quick to forgive. The cleansing power of the Holy Spirit is here today. Receive God's forgiveness and the Holy Spirit's cleansing. Live now in the newness of life afforded children of God. Amen.

Adapted from Kwasi I. Kena, *The Africana Worship Book, Year A*, ed. Valerie Bridgeman Davis and Safiyah Fosua (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2006), 148 and 156.

Benediction

As we prepare to leave this place, turn to a neighbor or, if you are at home, look in a mirror. Now, look into the eyes of the person in front of you and say, “You are fearfully and wonderfully made.” May this truth be a blessing to you this week: the Creator who knows you better than you know yourself fearfully and wonderfully made you just as you are. Let us go now to speak truth, share love, and recognize the Creator’s fingerprint in all of creation. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, February 2024.

Third Sunday after Pentecost – Immutable in Love

June 9, 2024

[Psalm 138](#)

Color – Green

PLANNING NOTES

Immutable. That’s not a word we hear much in everyday conversation. However, it is a word that gets a lot of play in the study of the doctrine of God. *Immutability*—that is, *unchangingness*—is one of the (generally) agreed-upon attributes of the Triune God throughout the history of Christian theology. Naming God’s immutability is, in part, a way of distinguishing God from humans, who are always changing and, at times, quite fickle. Now, you might be thinking, “But what about those times God changes God’s mind? What are you gonna do with that?” This is no place to enter into a centuries-long debate about whether an immutable God can change God’s mind. However, it does raise an interesting point for reflection concerning Psalm 138, our text for today, because the psalmist affirms that one attribute of God is absolutely steadfast and, to use our fancy theology term, immutable: God’s *love*.

Due to its concise yet robust articulation of God’s love, I invite you to consider using the psalm as a model to structure worship. Follow the psalmists’ example by opening with a time of giving thanks for God’s love, be it through the call to worship, a hymn, or a testimony of thanksgiving. Then, tell the truth of God’s love. Lift up how God has been at work in the community through proclamation. Call on God’s steadfast love to continue working in your midst during intercessory prayer. And finally, send one another out from worship with both the blessing and assurance that God’s love *truly* never fails.

Throughout worship, offer multiple opportunities for those gathered to encounter new and/or deeper facets of God’s love. If you pray a prayer of confession, invite everyone to recognize that God’s love convicts us *and* redeems us *and* guides us on the path of sanctification. Sing a familiar hymn such as “The Gift of Love” (*United Methodist Hymnal*, 408) or “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling” (*United Methodist Hymnal*, 384), but take time to unpack how the hymn opens us to explore God’s immutable love. Or introduce a hymn the congregation may not have sung before that speaks to the love of God in

new ways, such as “Now Praise the Hidden God of Love” (*The Faith We Sing*, 2027) or “O God Beyond All Praising” (*The Faith We Sing*, 2009). Let this be a service of delving deep into what it means not just that God loves us but that God’s love—a central aspect of who God is—is unchanging and steadfast.

PREACHING NOTES

“Your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever.” *Psalm 138:8 NRSV*

A great way to sum up this psalm of thanksgiving, don’t you think? The psalmist declares gratitude before gods and kings in the face of trouble and the wrath of enemies. We’re not given any details about the crisis averted here. But then we rarely are. And maybe that’s on purpose so that we can supply our own crisis du jour. We know the elation that comes from being released from something difficult. We understand the need to shout our gratitude; our joy has to come out somehow. Psalm 138 can give us some words and a structure for declaring gratitude.

Who are the gods before whom we sing the Lord’s praise? Is this about interreligious debate and whose God is the true God? Or is this about recognizing that there are far too many sources we turn to for deliverance these days? What do we rely upon as a nation or as a culture? Some say we elevate material goods or the money to purchase them to the status of gods in our lives. Others claim we bow down to the privileges of race or gender, economic status, or political party. Whatever the gods of this world might be, Psalm 138 invites us to reorient ourselves with God acknowledged as the source of salvation and hope.

A similar approach could be made to the kings mentioned in verse 4. Except the difference here is that the kings are said to join in the act of praise with the psalmist. This is not about conquering or overcoming; this is about recruiting. This is about telling the story or singing the song so well that even the leaders of the nations can’t help but join in the singing, can’t help but share the story. This is a different approach from one of power and position. They shall sing along, says the psalmist, because they have heard the words. And where will they hear them? From the mouth of the Lord, of course. But who will speak those words? Who will sing that song? We will, of course. We will sing it with conviction and passion. We will sing with our hearts and our hands and not just our mouths.

And what is the guiding rhythm of that song or the central theme of that story? God’s steadfast love endures forever. It seems simple to us, I know. This is something we know in the core of our being, something that echoes in the depths of our souls. It is there in our creeds and in our prayers; it is in our theology and our practice. Except when it isn’t.

The psalm doesn’t end with a statement about the immutability of God’s love. It almost does. But then there is one more plea at the end: “Do not forsake the work of your hands.” Why did that get thrown in there? This confident singer, this exuberant storyteller, suddenly seems to get cold feet. Or reveals a hint of worry. Your steadfast love endures forever, doesn’t it? Won’t it? Please?

Maybe that’s unfair. Maybe it isn’t a hint of doubt, a trembling behind the declaration of faith. Maybe it is a word of encouragement. Keep going, God, push through. Don’t forsake the work of your hands; keep your hand on the plow. Maybe it is a raised hand in the throes of passionate worship, a getting on

board this gospel train. Don't forsake the work of your hands, or "Me too, Lord, sign me up!" I want to be a part of that work; I want to be redeemed by your love that never ends.

To notice conflicting emotions in one prayer, one song of praise, only serves to make it more human. We are nothing if not a mess of conflicting emotions. Our faith sits alongside our doubt. Our certainty and confidence live in the same house as our fear and feelings of inadequacy. That's who we are. That's the one God chooses to rescue. We aren't expected to be perfect before grace comes. We don't have to be experts on loving before we can experience the immutable love of God. In fact, this is what makes God so worthy of worship. The steadfast love of the Lord endures forever. We are overwhelmed by this truth; we are overcome by this grace; we are humbled into gratitude by this truth. And then we proclaim it before gods and kings amid troubles and the wrath of enemies. And then we try, again and again; we try to love like that.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Call to Worship

Some of us come today with hearts weighed down with anxiety, fear, despair, and hurt. Together we cling to this truth:

God's steadfast love endures forever.

Some of us come today with hearts that feel light with relief, joy, comfort, and gratitude. Together we cling to this truth:

God's steadfast love endures forever.

Some of us come today not knowing what we think about God, confused and disappointed that the world God made is so full of evils of every kind. Together we cling to this truth:

God's steadfast love endures forever.

Be with us, God, in all that we bring with us, as we gather to encounter your unchanging love.

We come today to enter the dance of the Trinity who is immutable in love. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, February 2024.

Opening Prayer

Heavenly Father, we gather this morning with those who love You,
that we might sing Your praises and share Your love with one another.

You have shown Your faithfulness to us every day

in ways that we do not always recognize,
so we gather today in order to thank You for Your constant watch-care over us.
Help us to entrust our lives to You and Your purposes
as we pray in the Name of Jesus Christ,
who taught us to pray in the power of Your Spirit,
"Our Father. . ."

Written by L.G. Parkhurst, Jr. © Copyright 2007. Posted on A Psalm and A Prayer website,
<http://psalmsandprayers.com/>. Re-posted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2012/05/call-to-worship-prayer-psalm-138.html>

Prayer of Confession

(*unison*)

Holy and uncontainable God,
For trying to contain you, forgive us.
Loving and limitless God,
For trying to limit you, forgive us.
Gracious and boundless God,
For trying to bind you, forgive us.
Sometimes we are foolish enough
To believe that it is to our advantage to reduce you to something we can comprehend.
Forgive us, Almighty God. Amen.

Written by Janice Jean Springer in *Touch Holiness: Resources for Worship, Updated*, ed. Ruth C. Duck and Maren C. Tirabassi (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2012), 223.

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Benediction

This is the faith that Christians proclaim:
The power of God that created the world is the power of love.
The power in Jesus that rescues the world is the power of love.
The power in us that changes the world is the power of love.

Therefore, I bid you go in the name of love. Amen.

Written by David L. Beebe in *Touch Holiness: Resources for Worship, Updated*, ed. Ruth C. Duck and Maren C. Tirabassi (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2012), 132.

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Fourth Sunday after Pentecost – All-Powerful to Save

June 16, 2024

[Psalm 20](#)

Color – Green

PLANNING NOTES

As we conclude this series that interweaves the doctrine of God with the Psalms, I cannot help but reflect on belief and knowledge as partners in the Christian life. Belief leads us to pursue questions that deepen our knowledge, and knowledge informs the shape and character of our belief. Perhaps most important, though, is the reality that growing in belief and knowledge is not just an academic exercise. It is part of living our faith.

In Psalm 20, we see the interplay of belief and knowledge at work. From verses 1-5, the psalmist calls upon God to act on behalf of God's people out of a belief that these requests are in line with who God is and what God does. And then, in verse 6, we turn not from what it only believed about God to what is believed *and* known. The NRSVUE translation begins, "Now I know that the Lord will help his anointed..." (Psalm 20:6). The psalmist believes and knows from experience that God is all-powerful to save.

What would it look like to worship at the nexus of our belief and our experiential knowledge of God's power to save us? Not just save us for a life in heaven but save us here and now from all the ways sin impacts our lives—both the sins we commit and the sins that are baked into our society. How can we believe with one another in God's powerful acts of salvation? How can we share our knowledge of God's saving acts on our behalf? Testimony, yes. Intercessory prayer, absolutely. Preaching, certainly.

I would also like to make a case for a practice we don't do very often, especially in Sunday morning services: a love feast. (For further information on the love feast from *The United Methodist Book of Worship*, see [here](#).) If you choose to do a love feast, you might want to hold this service around tables, or you might consider sharing testimonies with one another in the pews or by writing and drawing testimonies on sheets of paper set up in the worship space. A sample draft of a love feast for this service can be found in the Liturgical Resources section. However you might choose to engage in this practice, use it as a time to share stories of God's salvific work in your lives and in the neighborhood, so that all may be encouraged and edified in belief and knowledge.

PREACHING NOTES

Ravkooktorah.org/PSALM-20.htm

One of the techniques that preachers use to get into a text is to set the scene. We ask about the what, where, and who, so that we can tell the story and so that we can find the resonance and ask. “How is that then like here and now?” It is a common practice with narrative texts and sometimes even with epistle texts where we ask who the audience was and what was the situation that brought about the letter. But I have rarely heard of this technique being used with the psalms. Sure, there are those psalms that paint a picture or describe a new reality. But they seem more about an emotion than an event. The events are often hidden or implied.

Psalms 20, however, seems to ask for some descriptive work. While many psalms are prayers or songs or shouts to God, this one seems to be addressed to people—or to a person. “What is going on here” would be a great question to ponder, along with “Who is talking in this text?” Is there only one person or is this a call-and-response kind of thing? The truth is, we don’t know. That’s a bit of a cop-out, I realize, but we don’t. But that doesn’t stop us from speculating.

Some commentators consider this a royal psalm, an address from the people to the king. And certainly, if you start at the end, that seems to track. “Give victory to the king, O LORD; answer us when we call” (Ps. 20:9 NRSV). The people are blessing the king, inviting God’s protection, and asking that God bring to fruition all the plans that the leader has for the nation and the people. “May he [God] grant you your heart’s desire, and fulfill all your plans” (Ps. 20:4 NRSV). The connecting moment, then, would be, “How do we bless our leaders?” How do we lift them up in prayer and offer them to God for daily direction and blessing? How do we do this even when we aren’t so sure we agree with the leader’s heart’s desire? Does Psalm 20 invite us to blindly accept any leader? Are we to assume that anyone who steps into a leadership role is ordained by God to have that position and therefore deserving of our total obedience? That’s a hard sell in these divided political times, to be sure.

So, let’s rethink. What if we’ve got the direction wrong from the start? What if Psalm 20 is not about blessing the king, but about the king blessing the people? The king in ancient Israel was to point the people toward God. He was supposed to be the sign of God’s will being lived out throughout the nation. So, is it too far-fetched to imagine that the king would bless the people as they seek to be the people of God at work in the world? The king wants the people to be sustained in difficult times and to shout for joy in times of accomplishment. And surprisingly, the work of the people is the work of peace. We are not to trust in weapons of war, whether they are chariots and horses or bombers and tanks, but to take pride in the name of the Lord, one of which is “Prince of Peace.”

We can consider, amid all the blessing and working for peace, who the anointed is in verse 6. Maybe this is a call-and-response, and the king allows the people to respond, and they say, “Now (we) know that the LORD will help his anointed; he will answer him from his holy heaven with mighty victories by his right hand” (Ps. 20:6 NRSV). They know that the king is anointed because actions match the purpose of bringing the nation before the Lord; because priorities lead to the waging of peace and the honoring of all people. So, the people add their voices to this litany and trust that the victories – victories of peace and community building – are from the hand of God. So, they conclude by saying, “Give victory to the king”; let these efforts bear fruit; let the nation honor even those on the margins; let the immigrant find

a welcome in our land; let hope prevail and joy be seen. These are the answers they seek, the sign of God's presence in the working of leaders and people.

Is that reading too much into the text? Perhaps, but the words themselves seem to support a broader interpretation than we might think. There is an interesting comment from a Jewish writer on the opening verse of Psalm 20 that might be a signal that something is going on here on a deeper level than we might assume. Rav Kook (<https://ravkooktorah.org/PSALM-20.htm>) suggests that when verse one invokes the God of Jacob, there is a specific intent behind that designation. When all three of the patriarchs are named – Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – there is universal acknowledgment of the God of creation and all that is. When Abraham alone is mentioned, the intent is to discuss the invitational quality of God. The rabbinic symbol for Abraham, says Rav Kook, was the mountain— as in the mountain Isaiah names that will draw all nations to come and learn the ways of the Lord, the ways that make for peace.

The symbol for Jacob, on the other hand, is the beam, as in a roof beam, the main structure of the house. Jacob was the one who was renamed Israel, remember. The God of Jacob, then, is invoked to draw attention to the specific needs and calling of the covenant people. They are the house of the Lord; they are the people of God. Psalm 20 invites us to identify as the people who are called by God to be the light on the hill or the salt of the earth. We are the sign that God is at work in the world. We are the ones who live out ways of peace.

It is within this relationship, then, that we come to know what it means to be saved. And the emphasis has always been more on what we are saved *for* than what we are saved *from*. We are saved to be that light, to be that salt. We are saved from fear and self-centeredness, and we are able to work in ways that align with the purpose of God, which we know from II Corinthians 5:18-19, was the reconciliation of the world. We are saved to participate in that reconciliation, to live out the ways of peace, to build up the body of Christ. Let us be about that business.

LITURGICAL RESOURCES

Call to Worship

We believe God will save us in times of trouble.

We believe. Help our unbelief.

We know that God has saved us in the past, tending and helping us along the way.

We know what God has done for us. Help us when we forget.

We call on God's power when we feel powerless to respond, believing and knowing that God will save.

We believe and we know that God will answer when we call.

God, open our hearts today to encounter your love that acts with us and through us to bring flourishing to all of your creation.

We come today to enter the dance of the Trinity, who is all-powerful to save. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, February 2024.

Prayer for the Day

You who shepherd the lost and comfort the afflicted

Guide our hands to touch the untouchable

Our ears to listen to the hopeless

Our eyes to see the misery of others

Our hearts to feel the pain of prisoners

Empower us to take risks to be channels of healing and mercy

So that this world may be a better place

Amen

Published in Cláudio Carvalhaes, *Liturgies from Below: Praying with People at the Ends of the World* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2020), 102.

Prayer of Confession

(*unison*)

Triune God,

We confess that we don't always like the way your power works. We blame you for all that goes wrong in the world, and yet we forget that you empower us to resist evil. We want you to help us in exactly the way we ask, and yet we forget that we are not the authors of our own salvation. We say we desire for your kin-dom to come, and yet, we forget to listen to your voice calling us to work for the flourishing of our neighbors. Forgive us, Holy Trinity, and free us to cooperate with you in the work of salvation for ourselves, our community, and all of creation. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, February 2024.

Benediction

May the dance of the Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—bless you and surround you this day and every day, saving you into a life of love and empowering you to witness to God's salvific work as we build the kin-dom of God wherever we go. Amen.

Written by Dr. Lisa Hancock, Discipleship Ministries, February 2024.

Order of Worship for a Love Feast

Opening Hymn

Opening Prayer

The following prayer by Charles Wesley was written especially for the Love Feast and recommended for use at all Love Feasts by both John and Charles Wesley. It may be sung to the tune TERRA BEATA (UMH 144).

Father of earth and heaven,
Thy hungry children feed,
Thy grace be to our spirits given,
That true immortal bread.
Grant us and all our race
In Jesus Christ to prove
The sweetness of thy pardoning grace,
The manna of thy love.

Scripture

Psalm 20

Address or Personal Witness to the Scripture

Pastor or lay leader offers a witness to the Triune God who is all-powerful to save.

Offering

Passing of the Bread

A basket of crackers or slices of bread are passed from person to person

Circulation of the Loving Cup

If, in a sanctuary, pass around small cups of water. If around tables, provide each table with a pitcher of water or lemonade or similar beverage and invite each table to serve one another.

Testimonies

*Depending on the setting, invite persons sharing a pew or a table to share with one another a time they experienced God's power and salvific work in their lives as they eat and drink. You might offer a guiding question like: **How have you experienced God's power to save in your life?***

Closing Exhortation

Pastor or lay leader offers a word of encouragement to close the time testimony.

Hymn

Benediction

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