

Alleluia Always

Psalm 146

I'm sure this is weird, but the joyous tone of Psalm 146 got me thinking about funerals... I find funerals to be profound moments in our lives together that speak to the heart of our faith. When someone dies, we grieve. We're right to be sad, right to feel the loss, right to recognize that the pain of separation is not what God intends for us. But then we gather in community, we proclaim God's promises, we sustain one another with stories and love, and we sing Alleluias even in the face of death. There's no denying the pain, but there's also no stopping the praise.

Like the family that emerges from the rubble of a home destroyed by a tornado who stops to give God thanks that they are alive... Like the hiker who is sweaty and sore and grumpy when their hike ended up being much longer than expected can still stop to offer a breathless 'wow' in awe of the beauty of God's creation... Like the community of faith—scattered and frustrated and scared in the midst of a global pandemic—who still gather faithfully online to proclaim the Goodness of God... there are many moments in life where there's no denying the pain, but there's also no stopping the praise.

We raise our Alleluia at absurd moments in life, but I think that's what the psalmist means in the opening verses of Psalm 146 today. *"Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD, O my soul! I will praise the LORD as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God all my life long."* To say that we will raise our song of praise to God all our lives long, does not mean that every moment of our life will be worthy of joy, but that every moment will be worthy of praising God. I hope throughout this Summer of Psalms we've come to recognize a little more clearly that the psalms are not naïve. From psalms of orientation when life is good, to psalms of disorientation when the bottom drops out of life, and to psalms like this one today, of reorientation, when faith and trust are renewed in God, I hope we have seen a rich tapestry of life's moments expressed in these psalms. These ancient songs and prayers bear the highs and lows of life and proclaim that God is there through it all.

When I say that not every moment of our life will be worthy of joy, but that every moment will be worthy of praising God, I mean that God who is faithful, God who is steadfast, God who is working salvation in the midst of the earth will ALWAYS be worthy of our praise. There is never a bad moment to praise God, though there may be moments when the world around us think it's strange. Because praise is not just about joy with things are going right. Praise is the defiant, joyful, transformative, and hope-filled proclamation that God is faithful to us. As the psalm says, *"Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God."* This help, this mercy and salvation, is the

specialty of our God. Our praise proclaims not just joy for the sake of smiles, but adding hope that can endure any crisis.

Our psalms are full of prayers and praises raised in the absurd moments of life—in deep pain, in abandonment, in suffering, in fear—when we can **still** trust that God is God, and God is good. And even this joyful psalm of reorientation is honest about the realities of life. Immediately after saying *I will sing praises to my God all my life long*, the psalm says, *“Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals, in whom there is no help.”* Immediately it recognizes that there is brokenness in the world. Immediately it recognizes that there is disappointment and that our earthly leaders do not deserve our full trust always. We can cooperate and commune and coordinate with mortals and princes. We can work with one another, we can work within our governmental systems, we can even like our elected leaders... but in the end, no human power deserves our full, unlimited trust. Only God deserves that. Because when we *praise God all [our] life long*, what we are really doing is joyfully saying, “I trust that God keeps God’s promises.” Our communities, leaders, and friends may be worthy of our celebration frequently, but God is worthy of our Alleluia ALWAYS.

This psalm notes that there is pain in the world, but this God we praise, this God in whom we can trust, is always working toward the great reversal in life. This God we praise is the one *“who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free; the LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous. The LORD watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.”* There is oppression, there is hunger, there is bondage, there is wickedness, but our God is revealed always in the great reversal of this pain in our world. Our God is a God of liberation, who sets us free from sin and shame, and delivers God’s people from injustice. And so even in these moments, we offer our praise, our joyful trust that God is being made known, that God is redeeming and saving the world. Even in the broken moments, we offer our Alleluia. We offer our Alleluia ALWAYS.

Now, it’s one thing to know this intellectually, to understand that this is what the psalms proclaim as the psalter ends with these multiple psalms of praise. The challenge now becomes authentically living as “Alleluia Always” people. To be disciples that proclaim a joyful trust in the liberating work of God no matter what. To be disciples who join in the liberating work of God where God’s presence is made known no matter how troubling it gets. To offer an *Alleluia Always* with our lives as we love our neighbor through selfless service, as we reorient our lives to a trust that is new every day, and as we meet our days with a song of praise. As a people, united in Christ’s love, who know God through the mercy that was poured out through the life of Christ, we know that nothing can separate us

from the gift of God's grace. Therefore nothing should separate our hearts and lives from a persistent song of praise, sung through the love and mercy we live out **no matter what**.

As we've said, there is no denying the pain of our world, but there is nothing that can stop our praise. We are a people gathered in mercy and meant to raise our Alleluia Always. We can raise our alleluia from behind a mask, as this simple cloth shows how much we love and care for our neighbor. We can raise our alleluia from behind a computer screen as our physically distant worship shows our compassion through spacious solidarity. We can raise our alleluia as we pray for those who are sick, care for those who are struggling, reach out to those who are alone, and comfort those who grieve. What a bold witness we have to share with the world, that even in grief, sorrow, pain, and want, we proclaim a bold trust in the author of hope and all of creation. *"I will praise the LORD as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God all my life long."*

Our God is worthy of our praise, our God delights in saving us, our God is working liberation in the midst of all people, and our God meets us in the joys and pain of life. Let us raise our Alleluia today, our Alleluia tomorrow, and our Alleluia Always.

Amen.