

God Gets Messy

Psalm 113

Living God, let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

When I was a kid I played baseball, and for most of the seasons I played, my dad volunteered to be one of the team coaches. And without fail, every season, you could count on my dad to teach the same lesson. We'd be in the infield, at the shortstop position, in a line, while my dad stood with a bat and a bucket of baseballs hitting grounders to us, so we could practice fielding. Eventually, enough kids would let the ball go rolling right under their glove that my dad would say, "EVERYBODY STOP! Take your glove off your hand! Hold it high over your head! Now THROW IT IN THE DIRT! Yep, I mean it! Throw it down! Now kick it! Pick it up. Does it still work?" Meanwhile you've got a whole field full of bemused and confused kids (except those of us who knew Coach Zuber and had seen this teaching method before, who were all laughing quietly) who were standing staring stupidly at their dirt covered, yet still functional baseball gloves. Inevitably, it would be the sheepish short-stop wannabe who just let the last grounder roll into the outfield who would pipe up and defeatedly admit that, yes... his glove, albeit dirty, still worked. Wisely, Coach Zuber would remind us, "Don't be afraid to get your glove dirty. Get it down, and stop the ball. A messy glove is a glove that got the job done."

Our psalm of the day is one that shows us that God would make a good shortstop. Our God is a God unafraid of getting down into the dirt and messiness of life. Psalm 113 asks, "Who is like the Lord our God, who is seated on high, who looks far down on the heavens and the earth?" Yes, God is highly exalted, and worthy to be praised. God is the great sovereign of all creation, and is the greatest good the universe will ever know. God is worthy of our praise "from the rising of the sun to it's setting" as the psalmist says and even that might not be enough! God is good! And yet that question, "who is like the Lord our God," gets answered: "He raises the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes, with the princes of his people. He gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children. Praise the Lord!"

Who is like that? Who, with all that power, with all that might, with all that glory, would be content to stoop to the lowest of life's moments to meet us where we are? God's glove is dirty with dust of life, and God is still God. Praise the Lord.

Psalm 113 is another psalm of orientation. It's psalm rooted in promises around which we can build our lives. Yes, God is mighty and holy and wonderful and powerful and seated on high and beyond our comprehension and eternal and on and on and on, AND... this God is with us. In the midst of God's greatness, God doesn't forget what it means to be good. God gets messy, and meets us in the pain and brokenness of life with tremendous love. Our God is not aloof and distant, our God is familiar and present.

When we're sad, when we're broken, when we're hopeless, God meets us there. That's why, when a beloved member of our community dies, we gather to worship. From the rising to the setting of the sun,

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through death and life, and all things in between, we're called to give God praise. God doesn't leave us in the shadow of death, but meets us there in love to walk us forward in hope. That's why we as a church community gathered in worship to listen and observe the 5th anniversary of the death of the Emanuel 9 this past Wednesday. God doesn't leave us in this place of despair, but through forgiveness, through community, through repentance, through commitment to justice and equity, God is getting messy and raising us up from the dust of life to see the hope of a new future. Our God gets messy.

This Psalm, in Jewish tradition is one of the "Egyptian Hallel" (or 'praise') psalms, often sung before and after the Passover meal. Passover is the celebration of a God who did not just leave God's people to their bondage in slavery, but worked liberation in their midst. God was with them, speaking through Moses, declaring promises to the people, doing great works to humble the proud, and releasing the captive from their suffering. These are the promises we orient our lives around as we embody this prayer. God gets messy. God is with us.

No matter what, God is relentlessly pursuing us in hope and love. Jesus reminds us, as we heard today, that when we are lost in sin, God is like the woman who wastes an entire day to find one day's wage in the coin that rolled away, and then upon finding it throws a lavish party. The economy of God doesn't make sense to our sensibilities that are rooted in scarcity—in the idea that there's never enough of the really good to go around—because God's economy is rooted in abundance. There's always enough love and grace to meet us where we are. God is always searching for us when we are lost in sin, lifting us up from the dust and shame and sorrows of our lives that we might join in the dance and praise of life in communion with God.

We can build our lives on this promise, we can orient our hope on this promise, we can walk in newness of life each day by this promise. But there is both promise and challenge in this psalm. Our God who gets messy, is inviting us to get messy too. The promise that we're never too far gone, that our God is in loving and relentless pursuit of us through grace, remains. But it says the lowly will be lifted up from the ash heap to sit with princes. In this same breath we're meant to realize that the princes—the powerful, the proud, the ones who allowed the lowly to wallow in the ashes without offering their hand in compassion or care—those folks are being humbled in the light of this promise. God's calling us to get ahead of this great reckoning, and join God in the work of humility, empathy, compassion, and solidarity. Like a shortstop afraid of getting our glove dirty, too often those who are privileged or proud will refuse to see our shared humanity with those who have been confined to the dust, ashes, brokenness, and pain of life. God is calling us to orient our lives by the promise that no matter what, God will meet us where we are, and God calls us to take the same approach to our neighbor in need.

Reaching out to the grieving, calling up the lonely, wearing a face mask to protect the immunocompromised, listening to the pain and sorrow of one who has been hurt by racism, giving of our resources to build up and care for our community, and on and on... These are all ways to meet God's people where they are and embody God's abundant love. God's love is going to bring us to the wide table of equity, one way or another. We might as well take our seat with a willing spirit.

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This is who our God is... one who gets messy... one who is always bringing the princes and the lowly to the table together. As my colleague and friend, Pastor Lenny Duncan, reflects on the struggles of the 21st century christian movement in his book *Dear Church*, he asks a question and answers, "You want to know why young people are pouring out of our churches and finding sustenance elsewhere? It's because we claim to be a community that is founded on the incredible vision of the heavenly banquet, yet we don't even have enough chairs for everyone to sit at the table."

No barriers, no exceptions, God is calling us all to the table together to make the heavenly banquet known here and now. God's either lifting us up or humbling us to get us there, but God's always got room at the table of grace, no matter what path we took to get there. As the psalmist says, "*[the Lord] gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children.*" God is giving us a future, a hope to proclaim and live throughout the generations. Our God gets messy. Our God is with us.

Amen.