

**THE MAJESTY AND GLORY OF HIS NAME**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

As I have mentioned before, the tagline on my e-mails has generated many conversations since I began using it. At the bottom of my e-mails, underneath my contact information, are these words: “Ask yourself this question: Where is God already at work in this situation?”

That question came to my attention early on in The Pastor as Spiritual Guide Program, and it has made quite a difference in my life. For one thing, the question slows me down and helps me take stock of whatever is going on. Also, the question helps tamp down lots of anxiety that might otherwise arise, as I remind myself that God is already at work in whatever situation I’m about to enter into. Finally, the question is a good reminder that God has always been at work, continues to be at work, and will always be at work in our lives and in this world.

Last Sunday evening, Rev. Steve Hein led the evening vesper service by the lake at Camp Kirkwood. Steve is a friend and the pastor of St. Andrews-Covenant Presbyterian Church in Wilmington. He began the worship service by asking all of us to look around and to call out, in a word or two, something that we saw. Some of the answers: calm water — sunlight — God’s people at worship — the sun shining through the leaves — dragonflies — green grass — tall trees. Then Steve said, “For all of these things, O God, we give you thanks and praise.” He reminded us that we can pray to God with our eyes wide open and by looking around and noticing how God is at work in the world and in our lives.

Steve preached about the providence of God last Sunday night. He talked about how we usually look back over our lives and say, “Oh, now I see how God was working in those circumstances!” Then Steve told three personal stories that remind him of God’s providence. I want to share one of them with you this morning.

Steve and members of the St. Andrews-Covenant congregation have made many trips to Brazil to work with a partner congregation. Several years ago, Steve and his wife came to our church to tell us about one of those trips. Last Sunday Steve told about getting ready to leave for Brazil. On the day the plane was to take off, a member of the congregation gave Steve an envelope with some money in it and said, “Here, Steve, take this money and use it however you think best.” Steve looked in the envelope and found \$1500. He stuffed the envelope in his back pocket and headed to Brazil.

When they reached their partner church, the pastor told Steve that the boat the church used in their ministry was broken. Steve asked, “What’s wrong with the boat?” The pastor said, “It’s broken.” Steve asked, “What’s broken about it?” The pastor said,

“One of the parts is broken.” Steve asked, “Which part is broken?” The pastor said, “A very important part.” Steve kept pressing him, “Can you tell me exactly which part needs to be fixed?” Finally the pastor told him and then said, “We’re praying that the part will be fixed.” Steve asked, “Are you hoping the part will somehow just miraculously be fixed?” “No,” said the pastor, “but we don’t have the money to fix it.” “How much will it cost to fix the boat?” Steve asked. And now I’m going to ask for your help in answering that question, just as Steve asked us last night by the lake. The pastor said, “To fix the boat, it will cost \_\_\_\_\_.” That’s right — \$1500! So Steve whipped out the envelope and said, “This \$1500!”

Steve said the pastor could have e-mailed him and told him the boat was broken and they needed \$1500 to get it fixed. Steve said he thought God was reminding him that God is always and already at work in different situations.

I had a similar experience in Tabasco, Mexico back in the 1990’s when I traveled to Villahermosa several times to help build the Theological Seminary of the Southeast. Before we left on one trip, some folks in the church handed us an envelope with some money in it and said, “Take this money and use it however you think best.” After we had been working on the site for a couple of days, a friend from the White Memorial Presbyterian Church talked to me and said he was asking folks in the group to contribute some money to help a senior student who owed some money. If he didn’t pay his seminary expenses, he wouldn’t be able to graduate and go out to serve a church. I asked Bruce, “How much money are you talking about?” And Bruce’s answer was, “To graduate, he needs \_\_\_\_\_.” That’s right, he needed \$600. I and the two other members from the church in Roanoke Rapids (one of whom was the treasurer) put our heads together and made the easy decision to hand over the \$600. As we met with that student and the seminary president, we asked that the \$600 be considered a scholarship. If the graduating student could repay any of the money for others to use in the future, that would be great. If not, that was fine. Well, that \$600 started a scholarship fund that was ultimately named for the church treasurer, who planned to go back to Tabasco the following fall, but died about six weeks before the planned trip.

“Praise the Lord! I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation. Great are the works of the Lord, studied by all who delight in them. Full of honor and majesty is his work, and his righteousness endures forever. He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds, the Lord is gracious and merciful.” (Psalm 111:1-4)

With those uplifting words, the psalmist calls all the people of God — the whole congregation — to worship and praise God for what God has already done in their lives and history. At the same time, as the people worship and remember what God has done for them, they are reminded that God is still at work and will always be active through his great works and wonderful deeds.

And what are these great works and wonderful deeds? The psalmist tells the old, old story of Israel’s deliverance at God’s mighty hand.

“God’s wonderful deeds” — that’s kind of shorthand for the story of Israel’s formation as a nation which you can read in the Old Testament books of Genesis - Joshua. By many great and wonderful deeds, the gracious and merciful God liberated his people from slavery and made them into his own people.

“The Lord is gracious and merciful” — this is how Yahweh described himself after the people had made themselves a golden calf and worshiped it at the base of the mountain while Moses was up top getting the Ten Commandments from God.

“He provides food for those who fear him” — even though the people grumbled against him and Moses and wished they were back in Egypt, God gave them quail and manna in the wilderness.

“In giving them the heritage of the nations” — not only did God deliver his people **out of** bondage, he delivered them **into** the land of Canaan, just as he had promised Abraham he would.

“He is ever mindful of his covenant” — God said, “I shall be your God and you shall be my people” and that promise is forever and for certain.

Those are the reasons the psalmist says, “Praise the Lord! I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation.”

In the second half of the hymn of praise, the psalmist calls the congregation to worship God in the ongoing covenant relationship. Here are the reasons:

“The works of his hands are faithful and just”

“All his precepts are trustworthy”

“They are established forever and ever, to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness”

“He sent redemption to his people”

“He has commanded his covenant forever”

When we cry out with the psalmist, “Holy and awesome is his name,” and praise God with the apostle Paul, “O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! To him be the glory forever,” we are not worshiping some far off, distant, unapproachable deity. On the contrary, we worship God best by remembering what God has already done for us, by meditating on God’s grace and mercy, and by living into the covenant relationship God has made with us as his people, especially through Jesus Christ.

We have many reasons for coming to worship God on a Sunday morning: out of habit; out of obligation; to get our tanks filled up for another week; to be with friends and neighbors; to hear God’s Word; to enjoy beautiful music.

Psalm 111 suggests that our main motivation for coming to worship God on a Sunday morning is to remember the marvelous things God has done in our lives and in our history. But we don’t come here on Sunday morning just to hear ancient stories as history that has nothing to do with us. Instead, as we remember God’s wonderful deeds in the past, we can focus our attention more carefully on how God is already at work right now in the situations of our lives. We can live in the hope that God will al-

ways be at work in our lives and in the world as a gracious and merciful God who is ever mindful of his covenant.

Along with the psalmist who wrote Psalm 111 for God's people, I will encourage you to look back over your life and discover how God was at work in different situations, even when you weren't aware God was at work. I encourage you to trust that the same gracious and merciful God is at work today. I encourage you to pay attention to what's happening in your life, especially when you're not sure why you're in a particular place at a particular time. And I encourage you to look around and name things that you see and then say, "Thank you, God."

Eugene Peterson wrote a devotional book called *Praying with the Psalms*. In his reflection on Psalm 111, he writes, "Do we think praise is the natural exuberance of the contented person? It is not — it is the thoughtful response of the redeemed. It springs, not from our good feelings, but from God's good acts. We praise God, not when we feel good, but when we realize that God is good." His concluding prayer reads like this: "I will remember and observe your goodness through the hours of this day, O God, keeping in mind what you have done faithfully through centuries of redemption, and staying alert to what you presently are doing in the lives of companions in faith. And I will use all I remember and observe to lift praises to you."<sup>1</sup>

I first heard Tom Fettke's beautiful song, "The Majesty and Glory of Your Name," at a community Thanksgiving service at First Baptist Church not long after we moved to Wallace. The combined choir lifted their voices in praise and I remember being overwhelmed by the wonder of the song and the talent of the choir members and musicians.

Vera is going to play an arrangement of that song for the offertory this morning. As you listen to the beautiful music, think about what God has already done for us, what God continues to do for us, and what God has promised to do for us. As you listen to the music, think about these words from the song, words which echo Psalm 111 and call us to praise the Lord with our whole heart:

*O Lord, our God, the majesty and glory of your name  
Transcends the earth and fills the heavens.  
O Lord, our God, little children praise you perfectly,  
and so would we , and so would we.  
Alleluia! Alleluia!  
The majesty and glory of your name.*

***Let us pray: Almighty God, give us such a vision of your purpose and will and such an assurance of your love and power, that we may hold fast to the hope which is in Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.***

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Eugene H. Peterson, *Praying with the Psalms: A Year of Daily Prayers and Reflections on the Words of David* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), September 12, Psalm 111:10.