

*Hymnody and Praise*  
Fifth in a Series about Worship  
from the pulpit of  
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church  
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania  
by  
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Readings: Colossians 3:12-17  
Psalm 150

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Abraham Verghese's novel, *Cutting for Stone*, follows the lives of twin brothers, orphaned at a young age. Marion and Shiva must learn to navigate the world together as they grow up in Ethiopia on the brink of a revolution. Both of the brothers ultimately become physicians, and the novel explores timeless themes of family, abandonment and betrayal, and the way that two lives can be forever intertwined.

At one point Marion Stone explains how – against all odds, given his impoverished circumstances – he became a surgeon: I chose the specialty of surgery because of Matron, that steady adult presence during my boyhood and adolescence:

“What is the hardest thing you can possibly do?” she said, when I went to her for advice on the darkest day of the first half of my life. I squirmed. “Why must I do what is hardest?” “Because, Marion, you are an instrument of God. Don't leave the instrument sitting in its case, my son. Play! Leave no part of your instrument unexplored. Why settle for ‘Three Blind Mice’

when you can play the ‘Gloria’? How unfair of Matron to evoke that soaring chorale which always made me feel that I stood with every mortal creature looking up to the heavens in dumb wonder. She understood my unformed character. “But, Matron, I cannot dream of playing Bach, the ‘Gloria’ . . .,” I said under my breath. I’d never played a string or wind instrument. I couldn’t read music. “No, Marion,” she said, her gaze soft, reaching for me, her gnarled hands rough on my cheeks. “No. . . not Bach’s ‘Gloria.’ Yours! Your *Gloria* lives within you. The greatest sin is not finding it, ignoring what God made possible in you.”<sup>1</sup>

That is our vocation as children of God, is it not? To find that calling within us – that gift and talent of our unique identity – and to use it for the common good. That is also our corporate Christian vocation – to find the *Gloria* within us and to give it back to God, over and over again. It is certainly the high calling of the church – to glorify God and to enjoy God forever.

This series of sermons is working its way through the order of worship from the Call to Worship to the Benediction. So where in the order do we put Hymnody and Praise? If our Presbyterian tradition has located the reading and proclamation of scripture at the center of worship, then I suppose you could say that its circumference is praise. We open and close with music, and sing our way through, from beginning to end, because God is worthy of our praise. That is what worship means – for all God’s worth.

The best guide for understanding the value and importance of praise is the Bible itself. It opens in Genesis with a hymn about the goodness and order of creation, and culminates in the Revelation to John with something akin to the Halleluiah Chorus. And everywhere in between, the pages of scripture resonate with the sound of music and singing. From Moses and the ancient Israelites singing on the far shore of freedom; to the imprisoned Paul and Silas whose hymn-singing frees them from prison. From Hannah rising up before the Lord in song at the birth of Samuel; to Job’s pain-stricken songs in the night; from Mary’s *Magnificat* when she is named the mother of Jesus; to Jesus’ last supper with his disciples when they sang a hymn together. Through all of scripture the people of faith are buoyed by praise of God. Even the trees of the field clap their hands together and the morning stars sing in praise of their Creator. It is our music

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<sup>1</sup> Abraham Verghese, *Cutting for Stone*.

making – probably more than anything else – that reminds us that the audience of our worship is God.

In his book *A Geography of God*, Michael Lindvall notes that people are unclear about what worship is meant to be, often confusing it with entertainment, therapy or education, perhaps a blend of all three. He writes that if it's entertainment, worship would seek to please us in some way, distracting us from the routine, and invoking happy feelings... If it's therapy then worship gets evaluated as to whether it promotes psychological or spiritual healing; if it's education, and Protestant worship long ago started to look a lot like school, the intent is the spiritual and intellectual improvement of Christians. But the problem with all three of these analogies, whether it be entertainment, healing or education, is that each one faces the wrong direction by focusing on what we human beings get out of worship. "The spiritual vector of worship ought to be in exactly the opposite direction – toward God."<sup>2</sup>

Danish philosopher and theologian, Soren Kierkegaard addressed this role confusion by comparing worship to the theater. He said we tend to think of the congregation as the audience, the ministers and choir as the performers, and God at the wings of the stage serving as prompter, the stage hand directing us. But true worship reverses those roles completely. The worship leaders are the prompters – pastors and choir merely on the sidelines letting you know when to play your part; the congregation are the actors – you are the ones on stage performing acts of worship; and God is the audience; God alone the recipient of our praise.

That is why our singing hymns and offering praise is woven throughout everything else we do when we gather for worship. It's why the scripture describes for us the appropriate posture for worship. The Colossian church was in a large, diverse, religiously pluralistic, urban setting. The crisis the letter seems to be addressing is that people are being led astray by false teaching.

To this church made up of Jewish and Gentile Christians, amid a culture of people who worshipped angels, nature, astrology, and a whole host of other little gods, Paul is making the case that God has come near to us, in the person of Jesus Christ. Christ is the revelation of God among us, and has shown us a path for life in this world. Seek a life, Paul argues, that is free to draw on the risen power of Christ. The marks of that life are compassion, kindness, humility, patience and forgiveness. Love is what holds the Christian community together; peace and

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Lindvall, *A Geography of God*, p. 63.

gratitude are the evidence that Christ dwells among you. While the world, can be a threatening place, causing all kinds of division, Paul says, the worshipping community has an ethic of love, and peace, and thanksgiving that bind us one to another. These marks of the Christian life enable and empower us to live the way of Christ in the world.

And how are we so empowered? We sing. We sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs to God, in rhythms of ceaseless praise. Here, when we gather in this place for worship, our focused attention on God (who is more than worthy of our praise) helps us navigate our way in the world.

Doris Donnelly has written a book called *Spiritual Fitness: Everyday Exercises for Body and Soul*. The first spiritual exercise she names is “Praising.” Donnelly believes that we are unaccustomed to giving and receiving praise. She says that if we were asked to stand and give someone we know a full 60 seconds of praise, we might have difficulty after about 20 or 30 seconds. Time drags by as we search for true and specific words of praise to bestow. And we would be mightily embarrassed to have someone praise us for sixty seconds. But, she notes, 60 seconds to criticize someone feels like a warm-up – we’ve just gotten started! Wait, we might want to say, there is a lot more to tell you...

Donnelly challenges us, as part of our spiritual discipline, to practice the art of praise. Praise of God lends itself to praising another. Praise that tells the truth and shows the beauty and worth in someone else.<sup>3</sup> If we get accustomed to praising God and praising people we love, she asserts, we can more easily move into the hard work of praising someone we have difficulty relating to otherwise.

There is power in praising that frees us to feel goodness greater than the pain and hurt which become the burden of constant conflict and criticism. In other words, just as Paul admonished the Colossian Church, what we do – here in worship – has power to transform lives, and spread the gospel of Jesus Christ – that love, peace and gratitude – into the wider world. The music of our praise has enormous power.

This past Spring, National Public Radio ran a story about a Syrian composer, Malek Jandalis. He was one of the first artists living abroad to criticize the Assad regime. Three years ago, at the beginning of the Arab Spring, he went home to

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<sup>3</sup> Doris Donnelly, *Spiritual Fitness: Everyday Exercises for Body and Soul*, p. 20.

Syria and was devastated by the detainment and torture of so many young Syrians. He returned to the United States, and while most of his work has been orchestral composition, he began pouring his hopes and sorrow into songs with lyrics. Back then, more than 200,000 thousand people had been killed in the Syrian conflict, and the estimate is that more than twenty thousand had been children. Malek Jandali wrote this simple song for all those Syrian children: *Watani Ana – I am my homeland.*

*I am my homeland and my homeland is me;  
the fire in my heart burns with love for you,  
oh my homeland, -- when will I see you free?*

Just three days after that simple song was performed for the first time here in the United States, back in Syria, Jandali's parents were severely beaten by government thugs. They are in the U.S. now, and are well, but this is what Jandali said of his music making:

“So I thought, oh, my God, you know, this little, tiny song is actually shaking an entire regime back home. For them to send their soldiers to beat my parents, is this how powerful music is? And from that moment, I was just on fire to do more.”<sup>4</sup>

Week after week, what difference does it make – to praise God and to sing: when we praise God, for all God's goodness, a new kind of world comes into being! We are empowered to live a new kind of life: a Christian life of compassion, kindness and patience, a life – bound by love, ruled by peace, and lived in gratitude – giving our Gloria to God.

AMEN.

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<sup>4</sup> NPR.org, April 26, 2014.