

First Sunday after Christmas -- December 31, 2017

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Pastor Charles Heup

Let All Together Praise Our God!

(Psalm 111 NIV)

Praise the LORD. I will extol the LORD with all my heart in the council of the upright and in the assembly.2 Great are the works of the LORD; they are pondered by all who delight in them.3 Glorious and majestic are his deeds, and his righteousness endures forever.4 He has caused his wonders to be remembered; the LORD is gracious and compassionate.

5 He provides food for those who fear him; he remembers his covenant forever.6 He has shown his people the power of his works, giving them the lands of other nations.7 The works of his hands are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy.8 They are steadfast for ever and ever, done in faithfulness and uprightness.

9 He provided redemption for his people; he ordained his covenant forever-- holy and awesome is his name. 10The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding. To him belongs eternal praise.

In name of Jesus the Christ-child who is always worthy of our worship, dear fellow redeemed,

Here's how one blogger described the post-Christmas season:

This is a difficult season, the week after Christmas. It's a mini-season of limbo, an awkward in-between time, and people have different ways of dealing with it.

Some are still running on fumes from the emotional high that opening presents and seeing family brought. They may even try to extend the holiday an extra week, with varying degrees of success.

Others feel guilty for over-indulging in holiday sweets and are on a weeklong shame fest. They are already starting to make those New Year's resolutions.

Even others are dealing with the disappointment of another year gone by, another December 25 come and gone, and a lingering feeling of emptiness after the last gift is unwrapped.

For years, I felt this way about Christmas, and to an extent, still sometimes do.

There is so much hype and expectation, building up to a single day. How does it live up to its potential? And what do we do the days after Christmas, when for many of us, a good old-fashioned case of the blues settles in?

His suggestion was to grieve the loss.

(<http://goinswriter.com/post-christmas-blues/>)

Is Christmas over and are those blues inevitable? Will we be left grieving the loss? Well not exactly. The real joy of Christmas doesn't leave us feeling empty and blue. It compels us to give praise to God. Rather than grieving the loss our Psalm for today encourages us to celebrate our gain! "Let All Together Praise Our God!" Why? 1) Because his works are great; and 2) because his Word is trustworthy.

You know of course that the Psalms were originally written in Hebrew and translated into English so we can understand them. But all of us would recognize the first word of our Psalm for this morning even if it were being read in Hebrew. It's "Hallelujah" which means, *"Praise the Lord"-something the psalmist says he's going to do in the "council of the upright and in the assembly" (v.1)*. In other words, he's going to praise the Lord in church--not to the exclusion of praising God anywhere else-- but he desires to praise the Lord with fellow believers who can truly appreciate and join him in his praise.

That's because the psalmist's praise flows from God-given faith, faith that regards God as the giver of *"every good and perfect gift" (James 1:17)*. By faith alone the psalm writer says, *"Great are the works of the LORD" (v.2)*. By "works" we understand the psalmist to mean God's great acts of history--the acts that outline and define his plan to save the world from sin.

No doubt from his perspective in history, the psalmist has in mind, among other things, God's work of delivering his people from slavery in Egypt. This was a great and glorious act because it brought glory to God's name. This was a majestic act, showing God to be more powerful than the kings and rulers of the earth. But most important, as the psalmist says in verse 3, this act, like God's other great works demonstrates that *"...his righteousness endures forever."*

God's righteousness is his quality of being upright and honorable. He's a God who follows through on his promises, as it says verse 5, *"he remembers his covenant forever."* God had made a covenant with the psalmist's ancestor, Abraham. God had made many promises to Abraham, including the promise to give the land of Canaan to Abraham's descendants, telling him, *"I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed..." (Genesis 22:17-18)*. This one verse from the book of Genesis ties everything together--the gift of the Promised Land goes hand in hand with that one special offspring of Abraham's who would be born and grow up in the Promised Land for no other purpose than to bless the people of all nations by delivering them from the curse of their sin.

Believing this to be God's ultimate goal, the psalmist can see God's finger prints all over Israel's history, from the glorious, majestic way God parted the waters of the Red Sea, to the way he provided food in the form of manna to those who feared him, right down to the manner in which God gave his people the land he had promised them, doing such great things as knocking down the walls of Jericho so that his people could move right in and claim the Canaanites' land and homes as their very own. All this prompted the psalmist to shout, *"the LORD is gracious and compassionate" (v.4)*.

If the psalmist had reason to say such a thing, how much more so we who know God's greatest work of all--his work of redemption. What the psalmist looks forward to in faith-filled anticipation, we know as an accomplished fact. With the words of verse nine we joyfully confess, *"[God] provided redemption for his people; he ordained his covenant forever--holy and awesome is his name."*

Of all God's great works throughout the whole history of this world, can you think of any greater than his work of putting on flesh and blood? The Creator of the universe became the creature. That alone would be something to ponder and remember. But that's not the half of it! What is truly newsworthy is the reason for which he did this--to provide redemption for his people, that is, to buy them back from their sin.

God's journey to earth was made not in a spirit of adventure and curiosity, but in grace and compassion. God didn't come here just to see what life was like on the other side of heaven. He came to fulfill a promise made to sinners--people he had every reason to destroy, people who had taken every good thing he had ever given them and had thrown it all away for a sinful chance to play God. He came to save murderers, liars, thieves, adulterers, rebels all, including you and me for we must plead guilty to being everyone of those terrible things and so many more. God came to earth to deliver us from the punishment that awaits sinners like us in

hell. He came to save us by becoming like us in every way only without sin. God became man on the first Christmas, so that on the first Good Friday our filthy sins could be drowned in his holy blood. God became a human being so that he could get his hands on humanity's curse, the curse of death and destroy it once and for all on Easter Sunday.

And what is more, he has told us all this! His rescue mission is not top secret. The psalmist says, "*He has caused his wonders to be remembered*" (v.4); his works are "*...pondered by all who delight in them*"(v.2). Who could say this wasn't a very good Christmas? It was a great Christmas-because once again God caused his wonders to be remembered, by our Children and the congregation in verse and song during our Christmas Eve and Christmas Day worship services. This Sunday Jesus will give us the very body he offered up and the blood he spilled as payment for our sin, providing all who commune with him something to ponder as he said, "Do this in remembrance of me." It was and is a wonderful Christmas so "Let All Together Praise Our God" because his works are great; and secondly, because his Word is trustworthy!

You've all heard the commercials selling stocks or mutual funds; after showing the success of their product every company is quick to caution, "Past performance is not a guarantee of future results." My friends, I have no such caution for you today. In fact, you can go right ahead and throw caution to the wind because the psalmist says in verses 7-8, "*The works of [God's] hands are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy. They are steadfast for ever and ever, done in faithfulness and uprightness.*" Translation, "God's past performance is a guarantee of your future happiness." What a message of encouragement that provides for the coming year.

The psalmist is reminding us that God's Word and only his Word makes life worth living. What a timely reminder when so many are feeling blue. Tell me, what is it that might leave us feeling sad after Christmas? Are we lonely? Are we depressed by thought of returning to the humdrum of daily life? Are we afraid that the problems we put on hold to celebrate Christmas haven't gone away? Take heart, my friends! God's precepts are trustworthy. His precepts are those things he teaches us in the Bible-those things he wants us to believe both about the past and about future. We've considered his great works of the past, the works by which he redeemed us from our sin and its punishment. Having saved us for a life with him in heaven, God wants us to know that he is ready and willing to every great thing it takes to bring us safely there. Let the devil try to flood our lives with loneliness and depression. God who once parted the Red Sea promises, "*When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you.*" And even if trouble or disaster should erupt in our lives God assures us, "*When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze*" (Isaiah 43:2).

He who turned the death of his own Son into our salvation will have no trouble at all turning the burdens of our lives into one blessing after another till we safely enter heaven's gate. Do you believe that? God has given you the faith to believe and a record of promises that have all been kept. He wants you to ponder that record, not just once a year at Christmas, not just once week in church, but every day. The psalmist says, "*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding*" (v.10). The word fear as it is used in this context means respect, jaw-dropping awe-the kind of thing that happens when you study the Scriptures through and through and learn what great things God can do for you and through you. Students of the Scriptures become wise beyond all imagination because they learn to lean on God alone. Fear and worry, greed and selfishness diminish in the lives of those who trust God to provide. While at the same time love and kindness, patience and gentleness flow from hearts that are ruled by the peace of Christ, thankful hearts that understand God is working all things for their good.

And you thought Christmas was over. My friends, it's just getting started. Every day that we ponder the gift of the Christ-child is Christmas because in God's gift of Jesus we always find new forgiveness for our old sins and we always find new faith in God's ancient promise, his promise to love us and take us to heaven. So Christians, let all together praise our God for to him alone belongs our praise now and forever. Amen.