

Psalms as Living Prayers
“The Ripple Effect”

Psalm 146

Message for August 28, 2022

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Praise is a common thread throughout the Book of Psalms. Today’s Psalm 146 is among the last five psalms of the Psalter, which are known as Hallel psalms. They each begin with the Hebrew word, “Hallel,” from which we get “Hallelujah” or “Praise the Lord.” In this particular Psalm there is also an internal echo, “Praise the Lord, O my soul!” waking us up to the ways praise resonates within us as we name our gratitude for God “...who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them...who executes justice for the oppressed, who gives food to the hungry ...sets prisoners free...opens the eyes of the blind...lifts up those who are bowed down...watches over strangers...upholds the orphan and the widow.”

In thinking about what Walter Brueggemann says about the interplay between lived experience and the Biblical texts, I have been observing my own life and imagine you might be able to relate. It seems that as each day unfolds, I am walking on uneven ground – the path I navigate is often filled with potholes and pea gravel and sometimes even quicksand.

In challenging times, praise might be the last thing we want to do – it is difficult to see what there is to be grateful for - and when the world is coming apart at the seams it feels selfish to seek joy. Yet I think most of us realize that when we praise God, it helps us to remember – even when things aren’t going well – that God is with us, and God is still doing wonderful things every day.

So, how do we make space and find energy to express praise and gratitude and joy when we face so many unknowns and cope with such extreme conditions day in and day out? If we could find some respite, if we could just catch a break, if we could walk a flat and unencumbered trail for a bit, maybe we could focus and come to recognize all there is to be grateful for, noticing how grace shows up in our lives and reveling in the good stuff.

We know that is highly unlikely. Rarely do we notice a long enough stretch of calm and contentment that would naturally provide that space. And really, we aren’t wired to wake up when things are humming along – that is the most likely time when we’ll just put it into neutral and go with the flow.

In thinking about some of the writings that got me through some of the most challenging parts of the pandemic, there was a point early last fall when Richard Rohr's daily blog focused on "Crisis Contemplation." In describing such a concept, he wrote, "...joy comes from an inner realization of true experiential union with God.... This realization descends upon us at ever deeper levels as we walk our faith journey. Authentic joy, however, takes place through our pain—not under it, to the right, left, or over it. There is much covering up, escaping, or denying our suffering...God calls us, instead, to the...mystery [of the] passion, death, and resurrection." Rohr then invited the spiritual teacher, activist and scholar, Dr. Barbara A. Holmes, to share how "such joy is for both the individual and the community, providing sustaining, life-giving power for marginalized people."

Dr. Holmes writes, "Our current circumstances require resilience and the steadfast belief that joy is a healing inner event and a spiritual practice ... [Black, Indigenous, and People of Color] who remember the ways of the elders have seen it in action. Performance of joy while the wounds are still being inflicted is not a display of otherworldly strength. It is an act of faith..." She goes on to note, "Performing joy offers healing from our addictive engagement with domination systems. We are being invited to awaken to our true nature as spirit beings, energy sharers, and prophets of potential."

This particular blog post was packed with wisdom about allowing and finding and practicing joy in the midst of crisis. The words of Sikh human rights activist and writer Valarie Kaur were also highlighted as she described the healing power of joy, even amidst what she describes as the necessary "labors of life." She writes, "Joy is possible even amid great labors—the labor of dying, the labor of birthing, and the labors between. We cannot force it. But when we create moments to breathe between labor pains, and surrender our senses to the present moment, noticing the colors and light and feeling of being alive, here, together, joy comes more easily. It is a felt sense in our bodies. In the face of horrors visited upon our world daily, in the struggle to protect our loved ones, choosing to let in joy is a revolutionary act. Joy returns us to everything good and beautiful and worth fighting for. It gives us energy for the long labor. ... Joy is the gift of love: it makes the labor an end in itself. I believe laboring in joy is the meaning of life."

These reflections remind us that we don't attain this state of heart or mind once things get better, but rather, we experience authentic joy by moving through the pain of this world. And isn't it interesting that yet again, as we delve into one of the Psalms and choose a particular label for it or name a specific intent by the psalmist, we come to realize that the verses are made up of the full range of human experience and provide us a container for the many feelings and experiences that make up our lives!

The psalmist speaks about God's justice and comfort and sustenance. This is a moment of equilibrium, and in fact, the psalmist models for us how to use such a reprieve as an opportunity to take stock and notice God's accompaniment and all there is to be grateful for.

As I read these words with fresh eyes this week, the image of ripples in water surfaced in my mind's eye. Our ability to witness to the beauty of the world, to recognize that of God in another person, the capacity to name our gratitude – these ways of seeing and being in the world create ripples. The joy spills over into other spaces and impacts other people and shapes other experiences. What a gift!

May we create ripples of gratitude and joy and be buoyed by the ripples created by others. Amen.