

HALLELUJAH!
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Have you ever had one of those moments in which you were so excited that you could hardly contain yourself? It could be any of a number of moments. We see it all the time in sporting events -- “the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat” as Jim McKay used to say on ABC’s “Wide World of Sports.” It might be throwing a no-hitter as Astros’ pitcher Mike Fiers did a few weeks ago or winning the Super Bowl or winning the Wimbledon tennis championship. Or it could be hearing Jo Ann say yes to my marriage proposal. Talk about being hardly able to contain myself!

Imagine being that beggar who had been lame from birth as he sat at the temple gate where he had sat for years, depending on the sympathy and generosity of those going into and leaving worship. Peter and John saw him as they, no doubt, had seen him many times before as they were about to go to worship. Whether it was instinct or still transformed by the Holy Spirit of Pentecost, or both, Peter and John stop this time and, we are told, they look at him “intently.” And the beggar returns their gaze “expecting to receive something from them”, Luke writes. You can almost see the anticipation as Peter and John stared at the beggar and the beggar returned their stare. If Peter and John are not going to put something in the beggar’s cup, then what are they going to do?

Then Peter addresses the man whose name we will never know. “I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up

and walk.” And, miracle of miracles, the beggar felt the bones and muscles in his feet and ankles become strong. As they lifted him up, the once-lame beggar slowly must have tested his legs astonished at what he had just experienced. And then Luke tells us that he began “walking and leaping and praising God” (Acts 3:1-8). He must have been beside himself with joy.

As we conclude this series on some of the Psalms, I think it’s something of that sense of being ecstatic, unable to contain one’s self that infects the mind, heart, and spirit of the psalmist. Psalm 150 is not only the last in the Psalter, but it is also the last in a series of five psalms that are filled with praise. Psalm 146 through 150 all open with “Praise the Lord!” If Jim Mays is correct in saying that the Psalms are humanity’s words to God, words that cover virtually every conceivable human emotion, then it is appropriate that the entire collection of psalms close with a magnificent doxology. In contemplating the goodness of God, the creative power of God, the grace and forgiveness of God, the writer can hardly contain himself or herself. There’s a sense of ecstasy at the wonder of it all. It has nothing to do with the self. The focus is entirely on the glory and the majesty of God.

The word that introduces each phrase that we read as “praise” is our word “Hallelujah.” “You praise God” or “Let us praise God.” Hallelujah! A few years ago Anne Lamott wrote a little book entitled *Help, Thanks, Wow*. While not original with her, Lamott popularized three basic forms of prayer: Help me, Lord. Thanks, Lord. And, Wow, Lord. An earlier, more theological version of those three basic prayers were: “Lord, have mercy on me.” “All praise be to you, O God.” And “So that’s what you’re like, God.”

This psalm is clearly a praise psalm. “Thanks, Lord.” Or “All praise be to you, O God.” But somehow, at least in English, those words don’t seem to catch the fire and enthusiasm that I imagine is in the psalmist’s heart, mind, voice, and quill. The Hebrew word gets at it more -- *Hallelujah!* Even if one did not know what that word meant, it wouldn’t take long to begin to get an idea of what lies behind it.

Hallelujah to God in his sanctuary. Hallelujah to God in all his creation (or firmament). Hallelujah to God for his mighty deeds. Hallelujah to God for his incredible power. Hallelujah to God with the trumpet, with the lute and the harp. Hallelujah to God with tambourine and dancing, with strings and pipe, with cymbals -- no, not just cymbals, but with loud clashing cymbals. Let everything, let *everything* sing Hallelujah to God. Let everything that breathes sing Hallelujah to God. Hallelujah!

If there were only one word that God’s creatures could utter to God, it would have to be that one -- Hallelujah -- because after everything is said and done, after all the joys and hurts, after all the celebrations and losses, after all the victories and defeats, our final word is still and always one of praise and thanksgiving to God -- Hallelujah!

I serve on this presbytery’s Examinations Committee. Just yesterday we examined a person who is a pastor from Germany and who has been called to serve a church in this presbytery. She and her husband first lived and worked in Utah before recently moving to the greater Houston area. She talked about the difficulty of leaving family behind and the stresses and strains of living in a new country where English is not her first language and raising a family in a country not her own. This, of course, describes many families in this country, a country made up of immigrants. I thought of those who have picked up stakes and left Syria, leaving all belongings behind, trying to

find a better and safer life. At any rate, this person from Germany said that, in spite of all the challenges, in spite of all the uncertainties, in spite of all the strains on the marriage and family, she is reminded that, in the face of all that, the good news of the gospel is good news and makes life “fun”, to use her words. That’s kind of what I mean by saying that, in the end, “Hallelujah” is still the best word to describe our relationship to God.

While it is not reserved for Easter, we often associate that kind of Hallelujah celebration with that glorious event. It is as it should be. But it is not exclusively reserved for Easter when we celebrate the risen Christ and the new life he offers us. The Hallelujah needs to be sung and uttered in July and August and September and February as well as at Eastertide. Whether it is Beethoven’s magnificent “Hallelujah from the Mount of Olives” (which, by the way, was sung in St. Patrick’s Cathedral this past Thursday when Pope Francis was there) or Handel’s equally magnificent “Hallelujah Chorus” from the oratorio *Messiah* or Randall Thompson’s somewhat more subdued “Alleluia” in which that is the only word that is sung or even Leonard Cohen’s even more subdued “Hallelujah”, the word is always one of ultimate praise to God, a word that acknowledges God’s greatness, power, sovereignty, love, and faithfulness. It is a word that, in an overpowering way, expresses the majestic praise that we, as God’s creatures, owe God.

And lest anyone think that it’s a word that we can utter only when we feel like it or when things are going swimmingly, it seems to me that it’s especially important for us to try to say it, sing it, or think it when things are not going well because it reminds us who our Creator is and who is, ultimately, in charge. Even if we mumble it, “Hallelujah”, we have offered praise to God and acknowledged God’s goodness and greatness. Even if

we are having the worst day possible, we can say, if only to ourselves, “Hallelujah”, “Praise God.” Somehow, even when going through a crisis or a bad day or a bad week, singing can have the effect of lifting our spirits. And I daresay that singing “Hallelujah”, whether it’s an uplifting and joyous tune or a more subdued one, can lift our spirits even more.

There’s no reason Presbyterians cannot sing “Hallelujah.” Indeed, we of all people affirm the sovereignty and providence of God, the ultimate rule and goodness of God. And if we affirm and believe that, then we trust that we belong to this God who has claimed us and who loves us with a love that is beyond our comprehension. As a result, we not only sing God’s praises, but all that we think, say, and do is to God’s honor and glory. We serve God by serving others. We stand tall and confident because God has created each one of us, but we live with humility because we know none of us is better than another. We serve others as brothers and sisters, and whatever differences there may be between us, they are nothing compared to our unity as children of God.

Hallelujah. Such a simple word, and yet it says “All praise to God”. Hallelujah indeed. Thanks be to God.