

September 15, 2019
Rev. Kerry Smith

Psalm 145:8-21 How Great Thou Art
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Psalm 145:8-21 New Revised Standard Version

The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made. All your works shall give thanks to you, O Lord, and all your faithful shall bless you. They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom, and tell of your power, to make known to all people your mighty deeds, and the glorious splendor of your kingdom. Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures throughout all generations. The Lord is faithful in all his words, and gracious in all his deeds. The Lord upholds all who are falling, and raises up all who are bowed down. The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season. You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing. The Lord is just in all his ways, and kind in all his doings. The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. He fulfills the desire of all who fear him; he also hears their cry, and saves them. The Lord watches over all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy. My mouth will speak the praise of the Lord, and all flesh will bless his holy name forever and ever.

Do you ever feel your heart beating? Put your hand over your heart and hear it beat? You are a heartbeat of God. You matter to God in your unique individuality. When I put my hand over my heart and close my eyes, I listen to my heartbeat and I feel connected to God. Like a string connecting me to my Creator God. I have an overwhelming sense of gratitude because I can see, both through the good times and the bad times of my life, that God has been with me.

This week I read Michael Eric Dyson's book, "Tears We Cannot Stop: A Sermon to White America." He says, "Oh God, the hour is dark. The suffering is great. But we will not give up. We will not surrender. We will not surrender because we have endured the lash of spite and the whip of hate on our backs. We will not surrender because we know that faith is greater than fear, good triumphant over evil, love more noble than hate. We will not surrender because our mothers and fathers, and their mothers and fathers, and their mothers and fathers, and their mothers and fathers, too, believed in you, believed in us, believed that no obstacle put in their way could stop them. They believed that the grace you gave them for their journeys would outlast any challenge to their hearts and minds. We will not surrender because your enduring and indestructible Word feeds the souls of our people. We will not surrender because blackness is a gift that has blessed the world beyond compare. Our minds and hearts and our tongues and bodies, too, have made Earth a better place to live. We will not surrender because we have survived."

Our mothers and fathers and their mothers and fathers and their mothers and fathers believed in God, believed that no obstacle put in their way could stop them. We gather together singing ancient songs, reading ancient words, and turning to God in prayer to join with those who have worshipped before. We join our hearts to theirs.

So often when we worship we talk about how important it is to praise God. Do we praise God as our heavenly Santa Claus who gives gifts that we want? Or do we treat God as a street vendor with whom we can bargain? I'll go to church twice a month and praise you if you do... fill-in-the-blank. We may even decide to keep shopping until something better comes along.

We sang together some of Psalm 145. It is the last word of King David in the Psalter. It talks about all of creation praising God's name forever and ever. We can't tell in English, but in Hebrew Psalm 145 has an acrostic structure. Every verse begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Verse one begins with aleph, a, verse two with beyt, b, and so forth.

Acrostics were written because they were easy for people to remember. They also made the point that what is expressed in the poem is comprehensive. The entire alphabet, the source of all words, is praising God. Not only all of the words in language but all potential words. We hear

of God's greatness and glory, and we also hear of God's goodness as gracious, merciful, slow to anger, compassionate, faithful, just and kind. Full of steadfast love. God is faithful in a way that no king of Israel ever was and God's kingdom of righteousness endures forever.

Psalms 145 tells us God is pro-active, upholding the falling and raising those who have been knocked down. God has made all that is and will ever be. God has formed the molecules that make up the cells and systems of a human body. God has created the trillions of bacteria that live in human intestines and the microbes that travel over our skin and lick our eyes as we sleep. God has created every blade of grass and thousands of insects. God's greatness is beyond measure. And yet, that same God is with us during any crisis we have.

In the Jewish tradition, the Torah is the Hebrew Bible, what we call the Old Testament. The Talmud is the compilation of the historic rabbis discussing and debating what the Torah means. The Talmud, the primary source of Jewish religious law, says that if you say Psalm 145 three times a day, you will be a child of the world to come. Imagine if at every moment of your day, you took time to look for the presence of God? Imagine if you are in a meeting or at a traffic light or in the grocery store, and you are looking for God moving?

All that is, is an act of God's grace and a reminder of God's abiding presence. I want to invite you to think about God's goodness in your life. As you think of the sun at your face, or having coffee with a friend, or as you think of lighting a candle or taking a deep breath or of visiting a friend in the hospital or being visited by a friend in the hospital or of sharing a smile with a new friend or reading a good book, think about God's tenderness toward you.

When the 1989 United Methodist hymnal was being created, "How Great Thou Art" was at the top of the list of hymns that should be included. It was written by a Swedish pastor who was caught in a thunderstorm. He experienced the violence of the storm then the sun returned and the birds started singing. He was terrified and then quickly fell to his knees at the beauty of God's creation. It is a song that resonates with people. It was sung by the Billy Graham Crusades Choir in 1957 ninety-three times. Elvis Presley sang it on his farewell tour in 1977 weeks before his death. It is a song that tells the story of God's redemption from Genesis to Revelation.

God invites everyone and says that we should follow. When I think about God in Jesus, Jesus didn't use big words or Christian code. Jesus didn't present God's plan like a prospectus promising a return on investment. Jesus simply asked people to join the adventure. Faith doesn't make complete sense or provide security. Faith isn't an equation or a formula or a business deal that gets you what you want. There's nothing on the other side of the equals sign, just God and Jesus. Jesus didn't talk about what people should say or not say. He talked about people's hearts. God doesn't spell out everything for us in life, but God does tell us how we can live our lives better and trusting God is always the right place to start.¹

Faith is about making the sacrifice of being present with your whole life. The other day I remembered something that I needed to do in the house. I was on a mission to not forget, so I walked as quickly as I could to the office to do the thing that I kept forgetting. My head was down, I wasn't looking where I was going and I barreled right into my 6'4" husband Lee. It startled me because I wasn't expecting him to be there, in my path as I was on my way to do the thing that I kept forgetting. I do that with God too. I will be going about my day, head down, not looking where I am going, only focusing on what is right ahead of me so I don't forget. And then I am startled to pay attention. Startled to stop, to look up, to pray, to worship, to give thanks to God.

¹ Goff, Bob. Love Does.

I don't hear God in an audible voice. Most of the people in the Bible didn't hear from God in an audible voice either. God is God and God can communicate to us in any way God wants to anytime God wants to. God speaks to me through flowers, other people, an uncomfortable sense, a feeling of joy, goose bumps, a newfound talent.² I see the beauty that God made for me and you as God saying "I love you this much." I see evidence of God in other people's lives. What's beautiful about other people looks an awful lot like God to me.

Bob Goff in his book "Love Does" says God doesn't pass us messages, God passes us each other. Share about the God that you love and what God has inspired uniquely in you. Now, what are you going to do about it? May we listen to God with our heart. May we feel God's realness and God's presence. May we feel our heart beating today, like a drum, with a constant beat. God is here, always and forever, Amen.

² Goff, Bob. Love Does.