September 24, 2017   
Exodus 15:1-21   
Praise

Rev. Kerry Smith   
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Exodus 15:1-21 Common English Bible

Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to God: I will sing to God, for an overflowing victory! Horse and rider God threw into the sea! God is my strength and my power; God has become my salvation. This is my God, whom I will praise, the God of my ancestors, whom I will acclaim. God is a warrior; great is God’s name. Pharaoh’s chariots and army God hurled into the sea; Pharaoh’s elite captains were sunk in the Reed Sea. The deep sea covered them; they sank into the deep waters like a stone. Your strong hand, God, is dominant in power; your strong hand, God, shatters the enemy! With your great surge you overthrow your opponents; you send out your hot anger; it burns them up like straw. With the breath of your nostrils the waters swelled up, the floods surged up in a great wave; the deep waters foamed in the depths of the sea. The enemy said, “I’ll pursue, I’ll overtake, I’ll divide the spoils of war. I’ll be overfilled with them. I’ll draw my sword; my hand will destroy them.” You blew with your wind; the sea covered over them. They sank like lead in the towering waters. Who is like you among the gods? Who is like you, foremost in holiness, worthy of highest praise, doing awesome deeds? You raised your strong hand; earth swallowed them up. With your great loyalty you led the people you rescued; with your power you guided them to your sanctuary. The peoples heard, they shook in terror; horror grabbed hold of Philistia’s inhabitants. Then Edom’s tribal chiefs were terrified; panic grabbed hold of Moab’s rulers; all of Canaan’s inhabitants melted in fear. Terror and fear came over them; because of your great power, they were as still as a stone until your people, God, passed by, until the people you made your own passed by. You brought them in and planted them on your own mountain, the place, God, that you made your home, the sanctuary, God, that your hand created. God will rule forever and always. When Pharaoh’s horses, chariots, and cavalry went into the sea, God brought back the waters of the sea over them. But the Israelites walked through the sea on dry ground. Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron’s sister, took a tambourine in her hand. All the women followed her playing tambourines and dancing. Miriam sang the refrain back to them: Sing to God, for an overflowing victory! Horse and rider God threw into the sea!

We have been talking about Wonder, Love, and Praise, which is the last line in “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling” and also the title of a document about the nature of the church written by our own Charles Wood for the United Methodist Church. We will be discussing more about this document in depth tonight At the Table and In Conversation from 5:00-7:00 p.m. in Glory Be Hall and you all are welcome to come! Wonder, love, and praise is what life is all about - knowing, loving, and enjoying our Creator. We have talked about wonder, we have talked about love, and today we talk about praise.

When I was in preacher school at Perkins School of Theology at SMU, one of my teachers was Dr. Sylvest. He shared a story with us after returning from a pilgrimage to Medjugorje. In Medjugorje the Virgin Mary has appeared to six Herzegovian children since 1981. For several years the six visionaries reported seeing daily apparitions from the Virgin Mary and Medjugorje became crowded with pilgrims. Today three people still see visions of the Virgin Mary. Dr. Sylvest shared his experience of walking into a room where one of the visionaries was talking with Mary. Dr. Sylvest watched as the woman was apparently seeing the Virgin Mary, but Dr. Sylvest said it was like she was talking to someone who wasn’t there. Then, Dr. Sylvest heard these words, “My beloved son, follow me and I will lead you home.” As he said those words to us in class, his voice broke and tears came to his eyes, and to mine as well.

Can you imagine the same message that Dr. Sylvest heard conveyed to you? My beloved daughter, follow me and I will lead you home. My beloved son, follow me and I will lead you home. We are blessed to be children of God. As human beings, we yearn to be loved. As 1 John 4:16 reminds us, “And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God and God in him.” God loves us so much. We are God’s beloved child.

We have an innate need to have purpose, to make a difference. Whatever we do, whoever we help, whoever we love, we do it all as a way to say thank you to God. We do it all as a way to praise God. Our lives are meant to be a holy and living sacrifice of love for God.

We live a life of praise because Jesus reaches us to reform, to renew, to restore, and to redeem our lives. Jesus changes our hearts and finds us when we are in our pits. Jesus saves us wherever we are. That’s what Jesus does and it is beautiful. In thanksgiving for that love that God gives to us, we live out our praise in our actions. We live a life of gratitude; we live a life of service.

When I look at our scripture today I see people who are praising God because they are filled with joy. They are telling the story of how God has saved them, how God has delivered them from slavery, how God has rescued them from the Pharaoh’s army that was at their heels until the Israelites crossed the Red Sea. The verse right before the ones we will read says “Israel saw the amazing power of the Lord against the Egyptians. The people were in awe of the Lord, and they believed in the Lord and in the Lord’s servant Moses” (Exodus 14:29:31). They were filled with wonder, and then they were filled with love, and then they praised.

READ SCRIPTURE. My favorite part is at the end when Miriam takes over from Moses and the Israelites. Scholars believe that Miriam’s song of praise may be the oldest Israelite poem we have. We don’t expect Miriam to be the prophetess of Israel teaching her people to sing of God’s victory over the Egyptians. In fact, Miriam is the first woman to be called a prophet. Joel 2:28 says God’s spirit will be poured out on all flesh, male and female, and here we see it coming to life. Miriam tells us to praise God, sing to God, she says. Acknowledge that God is God. Share your joy, share your energy with God. And Miriam tells us why we need to praise. We have overcome with God. The people of Israel cried out to God and the liberating work of God began, and then they shouted in faith.

It is the story of grief and joy, trouble and resolution, oppression and liberation. It is our story from hurt to well-being. It is the story of God for us, God with us. God sets all people free. The people were safely delivered from their bondage, and they had this spontaneous act of worship. Enslavement did not have the final say. God did.

Miriam is so filled with joy, so filled with praise for God that she has to act. She takes a tambourine and all the women join her in dancing. They were celebrating! Do we do that? We might do that for our children or for our favorite sports team, or for ourselves when we cross the finish line of a race or a project. Do we praise God in our daily lives? What does it look like to praise God in our daily lives?

In worship we praise God in our singing, but sometimes it becomes so routine that we are only saying the words, we aren’t celebrating. After we have taken the offering, we stand together and we sing these words, “Praise God, from whom all blessings flow; praise God, all creatures here below: Alleluia! Alleluia! Praise God, the source of all our gifts! Praise Jesus Christ, whose power uplifts! Praise the Spirit, Holy Spirit! Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!” That is praise. I mean it says praise five times! I invite us today to sing the doxology not as routine, but as celebration.

After worship today we will go into Glory Be Hall. It is a room filled with light. When I walk into that room I feel happy as I see the beauty of God’s creation. We started raising money to build that building in 2008. Do you remember the economic downturn of 2008? This congregation came together in that difficult time financially and built a building filled with light, filled with joy, filled with laughter as an outward way to praise God. As we celebrate over the potluck today and laugh as we support the youth of our church and their summer mission trip in their fundraiser white elephant auction, may we see our celebration as praise to God.

In thanksgiving for that love that God gives to us, we live out our praise in our actions. We live a life of gratitude; we live a life of service. Praising God means standing up for justice. It means speaking out against violence and harm. I was talking this week with someone about the United Methodist Church and what makes us different. I shared with them John Wesley’s General Rules. In 1739 a small group of folks came to John Wesley wanting prayer and wanting to grow in their faith. Wesley decided that they would get together every week on Thursday in the evening. To be a part of these Methodist societies these was one condition to be admitted, “a desire to flee from the wrath to come, and to be saved from their sins.”[[1]](#footnote-2) To see if salvation was fixed in the soul, it would be shown by its fruits by doing no harm (taking the name of God in vain, drunkenness, slaveholding, returning evil for evil, doing to others as we would not they should do unto us), by doing good (of every possible sort by giving food to the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting or helping those that are sick or in prison), and by growing more in love with God (by coming to worship, by taking Communion, by praying, by searching the scriptures, by fasting). Those were the General Rules of the first Methodist societies: do no harm, do good, and grow more in love with God.

Do no harm. Standing up for justice means that we name white supremacy. It means that we stand and fight for the refugee and the immigrant. It means that we work for criminal justice reform and we care for our environment. It means that we work to create a health care system that includes access for all. This isn’t just what I believe, this is what the United Methodist Church believes in. John Wesley, the first Methodist, believed that providing health care to others was an important duty of Christians. He found ways to offer medical services at no cost to the poor in London. In our Social Principles today health care is affirmed as a basic human right and the duty of government is affirmed as assuring health care for all.[[2]](#footnote-3)

Do good. Praising God means we treat each other with respect and decency and love. Language matters, and words have an effect on our thoughts, our perceptions, and what we are capable of normalizing. Dehumanization starts with language and images and tries to strip human beings of their worth. Dehumanization must never be tolerated. Language is the first step, we call people animals or aliens or illegal, and history shows us that can be followed by human rights abuses, all the way to genocide. We can’t play that game, we can’t use name-calling, mockery, hate, or hyperbole. We have to use facts, reason, resistance, justice. We have to change the rules. Brene Brown in her new book, “Braving the Wilderness” says when we hear disparaging language, we should immediately wonder, “Is this an attempt to reduce someone's humanity so we can get away with hurting them or denying them basic human rights?"[[3]](#footnote-4) Praising God means every human being is a beloved child of God and should be treated with dignity.

Grow more in love with God. I recently listened to a podcast with writers Jen Hatmaker and Brene Brown and Brene was talking about being involved in church. She talked about how we are more sorted ideologically than we’ve ever been in the history of our country. We go to church, we go to school, and we hang out with people who hate the same people we do. Brene Brown says being a part of a church community should be about singing, breaking bread, and passing the peace with people you want to punch in the face.[[4]](#footnote-5)

Praising God means opening our eyes to the surprising ways that God will use each one of us to care for the people and the world that God loves so much. God is always seeking and creating life in a world too often overcome with hate, with evil, with death. Life feels as chaotic as the winds and the water and the waves, but the power of God orders the world. Can we do as Miriam did? Can we take our tambourines and sing to God in thanksgiving? May we praise God with our whole lives today. Thanks be to God, Amen.

1. http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/the-general-rules-of-the-methodist-church [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. http://www.umc.org/what-we-believe/what-is-the-united-methodist-churchs-position-on-health-care-reform [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Much of this paragraph taken from Jen Hatmaker’s post on facebook: https://www.facebook.com/jenhatmaker/posts/1409600702472254 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. http://jenhatmaker.com/episode-02-brene-brown.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-5)