

Sermon | Psalm 113

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Preacher: Rev. Daniel Beilman

[0 : 00] So in the beginning of the service, I oriented everybody to a few different changes. There's been some people that have come in since then. Let me do that again. I'm Dan Beilman. I'm an assistant pastor here at Church of the Advent.

You've also seen Wright Wall. Wright will be helping us celebrate communion. Wright is the pastor of All Nations D.C. in the Northwest, a sister church of ours, and Brian Wandel, an ordained deacon at Church of the Advent.

He's usually at the Brooklyn worship service in the morning. Also, a little bit of orientation. We're going to start a new sermon series today. We're going to be in the book of Psalms.

No book of the Old Testament has been read so much throughout history as the book of Psalms. They give voice to every state of the human heart, from joy to sorrow, from anger to gratitude, for both individuals and congregations.

Now, there's a group of Psalms that holds a special place in the history of God's people. Psalms 113 to 118. These psalms can be considered as a single song.

[1 : 05] The song has been called the Hallel. Hallel means praise. Now, you've heard the word Hallel countless times in your lives. Hallelujah.

Hallelujah means praise Yahweh or praise the Lord. For the nation of Israel, the Hallel was used on many joyful occasions and feasts throughout the year.

Jesus would have sung the Hallel many, many times in his life and was probably the last song he sang before going to his crucifixion. Both Matthew and Mark record that after celebrating the Passover meal together, they sang a hymn and then went out to the Mount of Olives.

That hymn is most likely the Hallel. And as they sing its dramatic conclusion, Psalm 118, the disciples find that the psalm finds its fulfillment in Jesus.

This song has been about him all along. Now, we'll hear more about that on September 4th. We'll be in the Hallel for six weeks. Tonight, we'll start with Psalm 113.

[2 : 09] Psalm 113 is a very direct call to praise God. Very simply, we praise him for who he is and what he has done. And when we ponder God and who he is and what he has done, we're left with a question found at the center of this psalm, which gives voice to our wonder.

Who is like the Lord our God? Who is like the Lord our God? Let's pray. Let's pray. Lord, we need both your help in asking that question and in hearing an answer.

And in hearing an answer, Lord, would you restore our sanity? Would we find you more beautiful than when we came in here tonight? Would we find you to be more glorious and majestic and wonderful and awe-inspiring?

Would we also know you to be more near than we could have ever hoped or imagined? We pray these things in Jesus' name.

Amen. Have you ever been in dire need such that you experienced complete helplessness?

[3 : 35] Now, I thought of that question as I was preparing this sermon, and I had a hard time coming up with examples from my own life.

I mean, some things came to mind, but I realized they weren't quite total helplessness. Like, for one, this is probably a very common experience among people in this room, because many have done graduate school and have been, like, without much on a graduate assistantship or whatever. I started one week with just \$8 to my name. I had nothing except for \$8, and I had no food, and it felt a bit helpless at the time.

But, I mean, when I look back on it, like, \$8 is actually quite a lot of money. I mean, especially with ramen noodles, right? Like, you can go a month on \$8.

And when I think about it more, like, you know, I had friends and family, a community surrounding me that could help me if I ran into trouble, and I knew I was getting paid at the end of the week.

[4 : 47] So, I mean, that wasn't really helplessness. I experienced feelings of helplessness about a month ago. Our family took a vacation to Vermont, and we did a hike in Franconia, Notch.

It was a much more difficult hike than we expected. We were told it would be an easy hike, and it ended up being seven miles, three and a half miles uphill at about this kind of gradient, you know, 80 degrees.

And my 11-year-old, and even my 6-year-old did the hike. I'm very proud of my sons. They're great hikers, mountaineers. Now, the oldest two know that they're pretty good at hiking.

So, they often would go ahead of us, and then we would stop and wait. There came a moment when they had gone ahead, and I had stopped to talk to a couple that had come down.

I noticed an accent, so, hey, where's your accent from? Blah, blah, blah. And we talked for a while, and then we realized, man, we've been here for a long time. I haven't seen our kids in a while, so we call out for them. We can't hear them.

[5 : 53] This is our oldest two. So, I run ahead, call out their names, don't hear from them, run further, and I'm now frantically running up this mountain.

I'm not in great shape, so it would have been funny to watch, I'm sure. And while I'm doing that, I'm starting to feel a little helpless. You know, all of these worst-case scenarios start popping into my mind, namely because I am running along this trail, and there's a lot of cutbacks, right?

And some of these cutbacks, there is a phantom trail that shoots off from it. And I thought, oh, no. They started talking about Pokemon or Transformers or whatever, and they just took this phantom trail, and they're going to be lost and gone all night.

Have we watched enough survival shows? Will they be able to survive in the night? Man, they're probably dehydrated already. What are we going to do? I kept running and calling and running and calling.

By the time I got to the top of the mountain, there they were. They're great. They ran ahead. They were so excited to get to the top. But, you know, when I look back on those feelings of helplessness, they were probably irrational, I know.

[6 : 59] But also, like, I knew if I could just find a cell phone signal, I could just make a call, and there'd be helicopters swarming the mountain looking for my children, because that's the kind of land we live in.

And so that's not really helplessness. Now, this week I read an interview with Alan Gross.

It was written a couple years back. Some of you may know that name. He was a government contractor that languished in a prison in Cuba. His cell was infested with ants and roaches.

His diet was awful. He lost 100 pounds while he was in jail for several years. But the thing that he and his wife feared the most was that our government forgot his name.

Isn't that awful? When you're stuck like that, in jail, and you feel forgotten, because no one cares. Now that's helplessness.

[8 : 03] There's a gentleman at the church that my family used to belong to in Florida. He grew up as a ward of the state. By age 11, he had bounced from foster home to foster home, and he had had enough, just wanted to get out of the situation.

It was pretty bad for him. So he ran away at age 11. And for a whole year, he was changing his name, trying to avoid detection, sleeping in train stations, bus stations.

And then he realized that he was going through all those lengths for nothing, because no one was looking for him. He was 12 years old, penniless, hungry, completely alone, and forgotten.

No one cared. Now that's helplessness. There was a woman in the Old Testament named Hannah. You heard Wes read her story.

Good job with the pronunciation, Wes. Hannah was barren, month after month, year after year. And on top of that, she had to endure the mocks and ridicule of her rival.

[9 : 20] Hannah knew exactly what her status was. A woman in that culture, unable to conceive, was considered worthless. And did you hear her prayer? She prayed, Remember me, Lord.

Do not forget me. Why would she pray those prayers? Because she felt like God had forgotten her. She felt like God had not remembered her.

That no one cared. And that's helplessness. Except, not only did God not forget her, but she's exactly the kind of person that God remembers.

Look at verses 7 and 8 of Psalm 113. Verse 7 says, He lifts the needy from the ash heap. We are to picture mounds of trash piled outside of a city.

And we're to picture the ones who sit on these mounds. Alone, forgotten, helpless, hungry. The psalm says, He seats them with princes.

[10:30] He says that partly to show that their lowliness involves not only hunger and poverty, but degradation and shame. Similarly, the barren woman in this culture finds herself in a similar position of degradation and shame.

But this, this is who God loves. Who He pours out His love and affection upon. The poor, the helpless, the barren woman, the widow, the orphan, the sick, the alien, the refugee, the one in deep grief.

who is like the Lord our God. The psalmist first shows us God's transcendence.

Look at verse 4. The Lord is high above all nations and His glory above the heavens. Who is like the Lord our God who is seated on high.

What an image of majesty above the heavens. We're not talking about clouds here, right? talking about dimensions of time and space that can't contain God's glory and no language can adequately describe Him.

[11:51] Now in my opinion, the best attempt at describing Him is found in the Westminster Confession. It's a document drawn up at Westminster Abbey in the year 1646.

It says this, There is but one only living and true God who is infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions, immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute, working all things according to the counsel of His own immutable and most righteous will for His own glory.

Who is like the Lord our God? Yet what really makes Him unique and fills the psalmist with wonder is that He is seated on high and He stoops.

Our translation in verse 6 says He looks far down. Another translation says that God humbles Himself. And yet another translation says that God stoops.

That's it. That's what God is doing here. He stoops. What God does that? None. I love how Anne Zaki puts it.

[13:20] She is a professor at the Evangelical Theological Seminary in Cairo, Egypt. She says this. Have you ever seen a statue of a stooping God?

Not in all the ancient gods of Greece or Egypt or China or Japan or the tribal African gods or the gods of the Amazon. Not one of them will you find stooping.

You find them standing tall and proud. And the greater, the more powerful the God is, the taller they stand. You won't find a statue of a stooping God because stooping is an inappropriate posture for a God.

There is no glory in stooping. And yet, our God stoops down to look past the high and mighty among us and his eyes rest on the poor and the needy.

Who is like the Lord our God? For those of you who at the beginning of this sermon succeeded where I failed and identified with feelings of helplessness, this psalm, this kingdom anthem, shows us that God sees from on high and stoops for you.

[14:41] God stoops for you. He looks past the high and the mighty and his eyes rest on you. He will not forget you. You are not alone.

How do we know that? Because this psalm isn't a theory about God. It's not a set of moral platitudes. It's a concrete description of God which has been manifested in a concrete event in history.

We don't have to wonder what it looks like for God to stoop. He showed us when he became man. This psalm is fulfilled in Jesus. Jesus, who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross. What is the image of a God who stoops?

Look to the cross. The Son of God slain on a cross for us. It's the God who stoops.

[15:51] Now look at this psalm again and notice who takes the initiative. Notice who does what. He raises the poor from the dust. Notice what it doesn't say. It doesn't say the poor person has a moment of clarity.

Gets up, walks off his mound of trash, cleans himself up, promises to do the right thing, and demonstrates his trustworthiness, and then God seats him with princes. No, he raises the poor from dust.

It starts with God and his initiative. God's son stooped, as it says in Luke 9, in order to seek and save the lost, the helpless.

God's son stooped, as it says in Mark 2, not to call the righteous, but sinners. And that's great news. You know why? Because nobody is righteous. God stooped, because the Bible describes us as dead and trespasses.

Now that's helplessness. That's the most helpless person of all, the one who's already dead. But hear what Paul writes in Colossians.

[16:56] When you were dead in your sins, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us.

He has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. That was us, helpless, dead. And just like Lazarus, Jesus' initiative, he raised us up.

There are many implications to what we've talked about, which would be expected since we've talked about the nature and attributes of God. We could spend years talking about the implications of that.

and we've talked about the gospel, which is really the history of the universe. We could spend years talking through those implications. But we'll talk about one implication, and I'll suggest three applications.

First, an implication. This is for those of you who even though you've been rescued and been made alive and you know you are God's child, yet you are still in a dark night of the soul.

[18:15] You've done all you can, but you can't find a job. You've poured yourself into the job that you have, but you are being undermined by your co-workers and your boss, and you're experiencing complete loneliness.

You feel hurt by the church. and are unsure if you can trust anyone again. You hate being single. You're grieving a loved one who died and the emptiness is not going away.

You're so depressed that the whole world looks and feels gray and drab all the time. You feel crushed by regret. You're a wife, but you're not a mother.

And you can't have children. We look at Psalm 113, and we look at the world, and we know there's not a one-to-one correlation.

Not every barren woman in the world becomes a mother. Not every person in poverty is lifted out of that situation. So how do we receive this promise? I think it's by knowing that God reverses hopeless situations.

[19:36] But not always in the precise way we expect. I also think it's by understanding your story as it is united to the story of Jesus.

Your life is united to His. And so you know that in His suffering, He understands your suffering. You share in Christ's sonship.

When the Father looks on you, He sees His beloved child. Not just His beloved child, He sees His favorite. And as Jesus has been glorified, you are becoming more and more transformed into the image of the glorified Christ.

That means different things for different people. But in the meantime, for everyone, pray in a way that puts God in the vice of His own promises.

God reverses the hopeless situation. So pray in a way that puts God in the vice of His own promises.

[20:49] That's what He wants from us. That's how He wants us to pray. Now finally, three quick applications. The first is simple.

The first is read the book of Luke. We find at the beginning of the book of Luke, Mary, and she sings a song which the church has called over time, the Magnificat.

Magnificat looks a lot like Psalm 113. As we proceed from the Magnificat and go through the book of Luke, it feels like the book of Luke is this huge exposition of Psalm 113.

It's amazing. Jesus seeking out the outcast, the outsider, the crippled, the blind, the sick. Many of you have read it before, so do it differently this time.

Try reading it in one sitting. Carve out one or two hours and just immerse yourself in the book. Some of you have never read Luke. Some of you may never have read the Bible. And I think this is a great way to be introduced to Jesus.

[21 : 51] Being introduced to a God who stoops. Read Luke. Look on Christ. If you don't have a Bible and would like one, we have extras and we'll be very happy to give you one.

The second application is this. If we want to be moved to praise him, then we are to be where God most clearly demonstrates his greatness. I mean, we can go into the mountains.

I love to do that. We can go to the sea and see God's handiwork. But God shows his universal power in the mercy which he extends to those who are humbled and lowly. So, perhaps if we want to see God at work, we have to hang around rubbish heaps and keep the company of women weeping in the night because they cannot conceive.

Second Corinthians chapter one says, it is God who comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ.

Doubtless, if we truly understand the lowly position from which we have been raised, we would be agents of God, bringing comfort to those who are closest to his heart.

[23 : 11] The third implication, and that's where the psalm began, is this, as much as it is in your power, praise ceaselessly. Verse 2 says, this time forth and forevermore.

Verse 3 says, from the rising of the sun to its setting, the name of the Lord is to be praised. There is no temporal or geographical limit to the praise that God receives.

St. Augustine describes the prayer of the church as the unceasing prayer of a single man, unique across space and time. It's a description of the praise that God receives, a description of his greatness, and it's a command.

Therefore, let your prayers be full of blessings to God. Praise is one of those things that works from the outside in.

So the more we praise him, the more we'll see his hand at work in creation, in beauty, in acts of mercy, and the more we will wish glory to his name, success to his cause, and triumph to his truth.

[24 : 20] And when you praise him, praise him with the church. The phrase hallelujah, praise the Lord, is here found in the second person plural.

So our praise is to be done in the company of those who have been redeemed, of those to whom mercy has been shown, to whom God has stooped and raised up.

in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Let's pray. And let's do that now.

Let's praise him. So where you are in your seat, quietly, praise him. Give him praise. Tell him how great he is, and glorious, and beautiful, and majestic.

Now praise him for his love, and his grace, and his mercy, and his nearness.

[25 : 36] God, you are so great. And so good. Who is like you? Who is like you, God?

There's no one like you. And for that, we give you our thanks, and our praise. In Jesus' name, Amen.