

June 10, 2018  
3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Pentecost

# Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Hallelujah”

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Note: During our summer series, “Word,” members of the Covenant family will choose a scripture passage and share how it has been or become God’s Word for them. On June 10, our first participant in the series was Deni Horstman.

Psalm 150

Praise the LORD!

Praise God in his sanctuary;

praise him in his mighty firmament!

Praise him for his mighty deeds;

praise him according to his surpassing greatness!

Praise him with trumpet sound;

praise him with lute and harp!

Praise him with tambourine and dance;

praise him with strings and pipe!

Praise him with clanging cymbals;

praise him with loud clashing cymbals!

Let everything that breathes praise the LORD!

Praise the LORD!

Reflections by Denise Horstman

Music has been important all of my life. My father was a tenor in his church choir. I played piano for my church beginning as a 4th grader. Playing and singing the hymns of our faith were constants in our home. I was a church organist during my college years. When I came to University Circle for graduate school in 1980, the McGaffin Carillon was just 12 years old, and the bells of the Cragin Memorial Peal still rang every week at 9:45, and I followed them to worship in this sanctuary. After school, I joined the Covenant Choir and there met my husband, a tenor exchanging glances with me across the chancel in the alto section. The Reverend James Dowd selected this Psalm for our wedding because it was music, specifically religious music, that had brought us together.

Although there are no weddings planned for today, I feel that for many of us here, the making and hearing of music brings us together. An emphasis on quality in the instruments of our musical expressions in worship—keyboard, percussion, vocal, and otherwise—has been a constant for our congregation since our beginnings in the 1840s. In fact, an image of St. Cecilia, the patron saint of music, gazes down at us from a stained glass window in the east gallery. As we celebrate today the musical legacy given to us for our worship of

God, and for our outreach to our community, by our ancestors in the faith, indeed, "Let all that breathes praise the Lord!"

\*NOTE: About a half hour after we started singing, a man came hurrying down the path. When he saw us, he said, "Praise the Lord! I heard the music and wondered if I was being called to Jesus!" He joined us for s'mores at the campfire before returning to his campsite.

### ***Hallelujah***

Miles away from In Justin had been frustrated much of the morning. Despite being a master of puzzles since the age of 5, Justin had finally found a puzzle that pushed him to the limits of his ability.

He found the puzzle tucked away on a shelf of the beach house his family was renting. It was a simple picture of a beautiful beach scene, but its simplicity was deceiving. It was hard to tell the difference between the blue sky and the blue water, and there was little to break up the monotony of the waves, except for a few whitecaps here and there.

Despite frequent cries of frustration, however, Justin was committed. He sat at the large coffee table in the family room for much of the morning, skipping the daily excursion to the beach. He persisted because he knew that every piece had its place and that when he finished, he would feel a deep sense of satisfaction. Perhaps that is why that when he finished the puzzle five hours later, he shouted out two words as he placed the last piece: "Praise God!"

Many of us approach life like Justin approached that puzzle. We keep trying, despite our frequent frustration, to put every piece in its proper place, and when we do, when we have everything (and everyone) where they fit (even if only for a moment). We give thanks and praise to God, thinking that God's goodness is revealed in the order and symmetry of a completed puzzle, with each piece in the right place.

When faced with war and injustice, or the unexpected diagnosis that hits close to home, or yet another once-in-a-century natural disaster, or an inexplicable act

of violence that ends a life far too soon, we want to believe that God has a plan, or a spreadsheet, or a manual of operations or, at least, like a good Presbyterian, a book of order.<sup>1</sup> When life gets chaotic and unpredictable, we long for a God who knows where all the pieces fit, even when we don't.

The Book of Psalms is both the hymnal and the prayer book of our Hebrew ancestors. Reading it, we quickly discover that we are not the first ones to long for God to impose order and control on the chaos and disorientation in the world and our lives. We are not the first ones to turn to God with anger and frustration and questions and doubts when life defies our desire for predictability and control. The Book of Psalms contains prayers of all kinds, from dark laments full of despair to poems that make lofty claims with a sense of profound certainty, attributing to God the height of wonder and majesty.

And then there is Psalm 150, the culmination of this book. With Psalm 150, we discover that even when we don't get the answers, we're looking for, also when we can't make the pieces fit together into a coherent whole, even when life is persistently disordered and disorienting, this should not stop us from praising God with everything we've got.

In the Presbyterian church where I grew up, the task of the third grade Sunday School class was to memorize the Westminster Shorter Catechism, a list of questions and answers of Christian theology. Although most of the catechism has been long-ago displaced from my memory, I still remember the very first question: "What is the chief end of humanity?" The answer: "The chief end of humanity is to glorify God and enjoy God forever."

If we're not sure what it looks like to glorify God and enjoy God forever, Psalm 150 offers some suggestions, which all boil down to this: praise God with everything you've got. There is no instrument too loud or too soft or too complicated or too simple that it cannot be put to use to proclaim God's praise.

The word Hallelujah is a Hebrew word, a combination of the verb "Hallel" which means "to praise" and a shortened version of "Yahweh," the Hebrew name for God. Although not in the English version of the psalm, in the Hebrew version, the imperative "Hallelujah" is repeated ten times, calling us again and again to praise the Lord. It doesn't tell us why, or even exactly how, except to say that any musical instrument will do, that nothing is off limits when it comes

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<sup>1</sup> For this opening, I am indebted to Derek Starr Redwine's sermon, "A Day at the Improv," delivered at Fairmount Presbyterian Church, Cleveland Heights, OH, on August 3, 2014.

to proclaiming God's glory. This psalm calls us to praise God with total abandon.

But this call to praise cannot be understood without knowing what has come before it in this prayer book we call Psalms the doubt, the questions, the confusion, the despair all of which appear right alongside proclamations of praise and joy and certainty and trust. Psalm 150 is not meant to negate everything that came before, but to help us find a response when we are confronted with the fact that our world and our lives are not in our control.

What if enjoying God forever, which the catechism claims are what we're here for, means relinquishing control and order and predictability, and praising God with total abandon, even when God's ways are not ways we can fully grasp or understand.

If you wander into New York City's jazz club, The Village Vanguard, on a weekday evening, you might get lucky and hear a trumpet solo by the famous Wynton Marsalis. One Tuesday night a few years ago, Marsalis was part of a small group playing a set of bee-bop classics. The set started off in a fairly ordinary way, but then Marsalis stepped to the microphone and offered a solo called "I Don't Stand a Ghost of a Chance With You."

It was a sad song, full of murmurs and sighs, and Marsalis performed it with deep feeling and expression. At the climax of the song, he played the final phrase in such a way that the trumpet seemed to give voice to the words: "I don't stand ... a ghost ... of ... a ... chance ..."

The audience sat in awe...listening deeply. Then it happened. In the middle of that sacred moment, at the song's most dramatic point, someone's cell phone rang with one of those annoying melodic, chirpy ring-tones. Instantly, the spell was broken. Marsalis paused for a beat and stood motionless. The embarrassed cell-phone owner fled the scene, and the conversation in the club grew louder.

Now, Marsalis could have stepped down at that moment and quit the gig, disgusted that his set was ruined. But he didn't. Instead, he put his lips to his trumpet and replayed the stupid cell-phone melody note for note.

Then he played it again and began improvising variations on the tune. The members of the audience stopped chatting and slowly began to listen. He changed keys a few times and then seamlessly eased back into the

ballad, finishing his improvisation exactly where he had left off...“I don’t stand ... a ghost ... of a chance ...”<sup>2</sup>

As much as we might wish God to be a God of order and predictability, what we discover in this journey of faith is more likely to be that God’s sense of order and control is to use everything in our lives to reveal the depth and breadth of God’s love and mercy. In God’s economy, nothing in our lives gets wasted, no mistake or failure, no doubt or struggle. It can all provide the tune for a song praising God.

Psalm 150 calls us to use everything we’ve got to praise our God. And although the psalm focuses on musical instruments, what it is saying is that there is nothing we can’t use, from the best and worst moments of our lives, to discover God at work and to respond with praise.

Read in the context of all the prayers that have come before it; this psalm calls us to praise God with all the complexity and atonality of our live. God knows that some days all we’ve got are the discordant tones of anger and despair, while other days we are capable of praising God with the abandon of our carillon’s restored peal. God uses all the pieces of our lives to put together something complex and wondrous and beautiful, which makes our praise of God all the more meaningful when it emerges from sorrow and struggle and stubborn perseverance.

Last week the government reported that since 1999, the rate of suicide has increased in every state except for one, and in more than half of those states, the increase was more than thirty percent.<sup>3</sup> Then, just a few days apart, two celebrities, the designer Kate Spade and the chef and writer Anthony Bourdain, both died by suicide. In light of this, it can be easy for us to read Psalm 150 and think it is utterly disconnected from the reality of life.

How can we praise God when we are worried about nuclear war and tariffs and opiate addiction and climate change and sexual assault and police brutality and racism and school shootings and the treatment of immigrants in our nation and children being separated from their parents, and, well, fill in the blank with whatever keeps you up at night. How can we praise God in the midst of all this without appearing hopelessly naïve?

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2003/03/wyntons-blues/302684/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/suicide/>

The answer is, we can't...unless our praise of God is a testament to God's capacity to take all the pieces of our lives, the ones that fit neatly and the ones that are terribly disfigured, and transform them into something extraordinary.

The late songwriter Leonard Cohen is perhaps best known for his song "Hallelujah," a haunting ballad full of longing and angst that may not at first appear to have much to do with praising God. It's a song that has been used Cohen himself said it was overused in countless movies and tv shows to evoke a certain despairing mood, and it has been covered almost too many times to count. But if you listen to Cohen's original recording, you can hear, not just in the melody and the lyrics, but in Cohen's gravelly voice that doesn't sing so much as speak the words, that this is indeed, a song of praise, a hallelujah. It took Cohen years to write the song and to decide which verses would make the final cut, but when he did, the final verse he settled on was this:

*I did my best, it wasn't much.*

*I couldn't feel, so I tried to touch.*

*I've told the truth, I didn't come to fool you.*

*And even though it all went wrong,*

*I'll stand before the Lord of Song*

*With nothing on my tongue but Hallelujah.*<sup>4</sup>

Today, as we celebrate the anniversary of our tower being filled with bells, as those bells ring out in cacophonous and melodic praise, we remember and celebrate all these bells have borne witness to over these fifty years: political turmoil and social unrest, fights for justice that ended in tragedy, joyful occasions of matrimony and baptism, sorrowful memorials for those who had died this church struggling through conflict and coming together as Christ's one body, and, most importantly, week after week of worship, during which we set aside our longing for life to fit together just right and instead turn our attention to praising the One who made us and claims us and forgives us and loves us and makes us new every day. Let everything that has breath, praise the Lord. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/music/la-et-ms-leonard-cohen-hallelujah-20161111-story.html>