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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Fourth Sunday in Advent (Series C)

December 20, 2015

Text: Psalm 148

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The week of Christmas has finally arrived. In all likelihood, there are a million things left to do before Thursday. My word of encouragement is to remember why we're so busy in the first place! It's all about the birth of Jesus. Or at least it should be. In the midst of all the things you're going to do, rejoice in the birth of our Savior.

Speaking of rejoicing...that's the theme I want to work with this morning. Before we get too far along, I want to make sure you don't misunderstand me. I'm not talking about being happy or giddy or even merry, though I hope those emotions are in rich supply too. What I want us to consider on this Sunday before Christmas, is something much richer and deeper than those emotion. I want us to consider joy and rejoicing the likes described in I Peter 1:8, "you rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory." The joy I'm talking about is a gift of God's Holy Spirit. You don't conjure it up with lots of presents and toys and food and holy cheer, as good as those things are. This spiritual gift of joy leading to rejoicing is yours as God's baptized children.

Let's begin by considering a song of joy that is much older than anything you're hearing on the airways right now. I'm talking about Psalm 148. We don't know who the composer was. But it's safe to say that this psalm is at least 2,500 years old. It's a psalm of glorious praise. What's most wonderful about it is that the praise of God Almighty is portrayed as being proper and good for more than just us mere human beings. The psalmist envisions all creation praising the Lord, each part of creation praising God according to its unique nature and character.

This joyous praise begins with the heavenly realms. "Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights! Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his hosts" (vs. 1-2). It is fitting for all the heavenly hosts to give praise; they dwell in the immediate, direct presence of God. They experience God's majesty and love and awesome glory in complete fullness.

And they help us with our divine praise and worship. Did not the angelic multitude lead the shepherds in praise at the birth of Jesus, “Glory to God in the highest and peace to His people on earth” (Lk 2:14)? Gabriel announced to Mary that she would give birth to Jesus, God’s Son and Savior of the world. It is fitting that angels rejoice in God and in His marvelous deeds. For they dwell in His presence and God commissions them to lead His people in the praises of the redeemed.

The psalmist continues with his description of universal praise in verses 3–6. He calls upon the cosmic realm to praise God. “Praise him, sun and moon, praise him, all you shining stars! Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens! Let them praise the name of the Lord! For he commanded and they were created.” How might the sun and moon and stars declared their praise for God? Each according to its nature! They shine with created light over their respective domains. The sun fills the sky to create the day for work and play and growth. The moon provides light to inspire our slumbering hours while guiding the ocean tides in their on-going work of molding the many ocean coastlines. The stars shine throughout the universe in ceaseless praise of their Creator thus reminding us that the joy of rejoicing is not limited to the third planet of this one solar system in the Milky Way Galaxy.

All these lights guide us in praise of the Lord Jesus who is the light of the world, the light that came into the world to cast out the darkness of sin, evil, and death. And can we forget that a Star led wise men from the east to the Christ Child so that they could rejoice as they worship Him on bended knees and with proffered gifts (Mt. 2)?

The praise and rejoicing of creation includes the natural elements of the earth. Vs. 7–10, “Praise the Lord from the earth, you great sea creatures and all deeps, fire and hail, snow and mist, stormy wind fulfilling his word! Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars! Beast and all livestock, creeping things and flying birds!” Isn’t it most curious that the psalmist calls upon not only the living, animate creatures of the world but the inanimate, non-living realms (i.e., mountains, hills, fire, and mist, etc). All created things are brought into the chorus of joy and rejoicing!

So the wind praises God through its howling. Remember that in the next day or so when the frigid wind sings its praise to the Lord of all creation. The hail brings praise to God by being cold, fire by being hot. Mountains praise the Lord by being strong and majestic. And so the Lord is called our rock and mighty fortress.

The creatures of the watery depths and the mighty land animals declare their praise as they go about doing their unique and wonderful creaturely activities. The lions' roar, the chickadees' chatter, the whales' song, and the lambs' bleating all signal their praise of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Isaiah said that even the ox knows his owner and the donkey its master's crib (Is. 1). Because of that one verse, most manger scenes include oxen and donkeys for they know that the newborn Jesus is their divine owner and maker. Even the insects, according to the psalmist, praise God by doing insect-things! Spiders spinning webs. Bees gathering nectar and making honey. Dare we say, flies praising God by their bothersome flying?!

Sometimes you hear about Christians who get a little upset about manger scenes and even some Christmas carols because of so-called "non-biblical material." The Bible certainly doesn't mention anything about specific animals being present at the birth of Jesus. And yet we sing – Away in a Manger – "The cattle are lowing..." No cattle or sheep or donkeys are mentioned in Luke 2.

Our kids recited a lovely English Christmas Carol, "The Friendly Beasts." Although none of those animals are mentioned in the Lord's nativity, it follows in the spirit of Psalm 148 as the animal kingdom is called upon to rejoice in their Creator by doing the very things God created them to do. So a donkey carries Mary for that's in its nature to carry persons and things. The cow shares his hay with Jesus. The sheep give their wool for a blanket. Doves coo a lullaby for Jesus. "And every beast by some good spell in the stable dark was glad to tell of the gift he gave Emmanuel, the gift he gave Emmanuel." Each according to its nature, praised God. So I say, pack the mangers full of animals according to Psalm 148! That the Lord Jesus may be praised all the more gloriously!!

Each part of creation is unique, contributing its own special part to the world's joyous praise of her Creator. And can we forget that Jesus warned the Pharisees that if the crowd rejoicing in His entrance into Jerusalem were to go silent, then the very stones would begin crying out in praise to the Savior (Lk 19)?

Finally, the psalmist narrows the praise of creation down to us human beings. Vs. 11–13, "Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth! Young men and maidens together, old men and children! Let them praise the name of the Lord, for his name alone is exalted; his majesty is above earth and heaven." We're used to thinking about all those adults – kings, princes, rulers, men and women – praising God. And well they should. King David composed psalms. The virgin maiden, Mary,

sang her Magnificat, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior” (Lk. 1) after she visited Elizabeth, her pregnant elderly aunt. After the birth of his son, John the Baptist, the elderly Zechariah composed his Benedictus, “Blessed by the Lord God of Israel for he has visited and redeemed his people” (Lk 1). Beautiful, one and all. It is in our nature to praise God for we are created in His divine image!

But I want to focus on children praising God. In one of the most extraordinary events in all Holy Scripture, we find that the youngest among us joining in creation’s joyous praise of the Savior. While in his mother’s womb, John the Baptist leaps in joyous praise when pregnant Mary arrives and greets his mother, Elizabeth. The six month old – in utero John – knows he’s in the presence of His creator and redeemer. As if this weren’t marvelous enough, we must realize that Jesus is also in His mother’s womb! “For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy” (Lk 1:44). Yes, babies in their mother’s womb are invited in the worship of their Lord and Savior. For this reason alone, though there are so many others, our church supports and seeks to protect the lives of all children. Even those in the womb praise God by growing and leaping and preparing for birth. Let the children come to me, and do not forbid them said a very stern Jesus to His overly fussy adult disciples (Mk 10). For the kingdom of God is like unto these children who trust in Me so completely.

To all of St. John’s youth, who have been our worship leaders for the day, thank you. Thank you for leading us in that ancient yet youthful activity of worship. Your doxology to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is the greatest gift you could have given.

Joy and rejoicing. May this entire week be filled with that divine gift of the Lord’s grace. A very Merry Christmas to you all for “He has raised up a horn for his people, praise for all his saints, for the people of Israel who are near to him. Praise the Lord!” (vs. 14).

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.