

Praise the Lord

^{1st} Sunday after Christmas - Year A - 12/29/2019

Psalm Reading: 148

^{1st} Reading: Matt. 2:13-23, ^{2nd}: Isaiah 63:7-9

I heard a horrendous news report a few days ago. A woman threw her two children off from the top of a parking garage in Boston and then jumped to her own death after them. I could hardly conceive of what would prompt a person to such an extremity. She must have been undergoing severe depression or rage. She must have felt herself in a position so desperate that she could not find a way out of it. There could have been no hope, no light at the end of a long dark tunnel. At the time of this writing, if there is a known motive, it has not been released to the public.

It is a sad fact that this incident happened on Christmas Day, which gives it added poignancy. I did not hear about it until two days later, in the form of a news report on the radio. It made a deep impression on my mind. I was getting set to write this sermon on "Praising the Lord", thinking positive thoughts about the greatness of our God, ready for an upbeat sermon that would have everyone singing God's praises by the end of it. Suddenly, my thoughts took a swerve. The report made me wonder how we can praise God in times of tragedy and times of disaster, human disasters on both the small scale and on the large scale. This is, of course, a crucial and challenging question for Christians not just in this age of conflict and strife, but every age, because they all seem to be filled with conflict and strife, for we believe in an all knowing God, a God

who loves us and wants only the best for us. How does this square with incidents we hear about in the news?

Well, we do not praise God or thank God for such incidents as the tragedy at the parking garage. Truthfully, I don't think God expects praise in such moments, and further I am certain God does not want us to experience such tragedy for ourselves. Rather in times of stress that are pushing us to the breaking point God is expecting us to ask for deliverance from such evil. In fact, when evil happens God is surely appalled by it. Recall God's reaction to Cain when God asked Cain what he had done with his brother Abel, and we all know what Cain had done. We can read it in Genesis 4:8-10:

Now Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let's go out to the field." While they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him. Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" "I don't know he replied. "Am I my brother's keeper?" The Lord said, "What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground."

Cain has killed his brother. God tells Cain that his brother's blood cries out to him from the ground! God hears the cry! God's sympathy is with this man who had been destroyed. Our sympathy, too, is with Abel. I ache for the man, but God's aching is stronger by far. And my sympathy can only go so far.

We humans: our minds are encased in these skulls, and the only way we can add information to these thinking boxes is through our senses. We can see, hear, smell, taste, and feel. And all of our understanding is mediated by these sensations. And so it would seem impossible for us to get outside of that, to actually comprehend what someone else is going through, to

actually generate within ourselves a common feeling for another.

I think God has instilled this ability within us, and this is something that, perhaps, we should be thanking God for. Yes, we can feel emotional pain vicariously when we see what has happened with another, often in a way that pierces through our thick skulls. And this is important not just for our moral life, but because of the way it connects us with other human beings, because of the way that it connects us with God.

This is something I learned while doing an internship with a hospice provider in Cass City called Compassus. I went from patient to patient with the Chaplain, and we would sit with people who were in the last months, weeks, hours and even minutes of their lives. I was surprised at how positive most of them were. The people who were suffering from the pain and fatigue of disease and approaching death were often the ones trying to comfort their family and friends. But all seemed to understand what was important about the situation was not the physical “reality”, but the emotional connection among the people who were present, and that emotional connection was not over even when someone had died. It was still there and would last on to eternity, because there was also present a being greater than all of us.

I learned through this experience, that even those in the last extremity of life still have something to be grateful for. They could be grateful for the people present in their lives because these people were given to them by God. They might include not just family members, but nurses, doctors, the receptionist sitting at the desk in the hospital waiting room, the

volunteers pointing the way for the visiting friend who holds a hand and says a prayer, and the deacon from the church who brings glad tidings and a prayer shawl. And even the whole society that surrounds her, providing her with food, transportation, and a place to live.

It is often said that God works in mysterious ways. And yes, it is mysterious. Sometimes it is so subtle that we do not see it unless we are consciously looking for it. And so at times, we stew in the mire of our own problems. We are not looking outside the brain-box we call a skull, but wholly concerned with what is going on inside of it. We are too occupied by our personal aches and pains. Too occupied by our own financial situation, too absorbed in someone else's view of us. And this is exactly why we should be praising God because any contemplation of the divine takes us outside of ourselves. It elevates us to a higher level than where we are because wherever we are, God is in a higher place.

If we are praising God, we are not praising God for the evil in our lives, we are praising God for what is Good in our lives. So, not only does God then take us outside of our brain box, but shows us that which is good. You know we have a tendency to only see God in the big rescues that happen to us. Like when you have a close call in an accident, or when you find out that you have had a windfall. But God is in every little good that comes to you. We begin to look up to see that our blessings are more numerous than we had ever imagined. We can thank God for the meal we are eating. We can be mindful of a conversation, or of the warm water that cascades from a shower on a cold morning, or the hearty handshake of a new

acquaintance, or of the feeling that wells up inside of us when we enter this sanctuary and see the cross hanging high above the chancel.

Our reading from Isaiah (Isaiah 63:7-9) is like a praise poem to God. It tells us something of what praising God is all about. It begins with verse 7 of chapter 63, *“I will tell of the kindnesses of the Lord, the deeds for which he is to be praised, according to all the Lord has done for us – yes, the many good things he has done for Israel...”* Isaiah is telling us that we are praising God, not just to be praising. This is not flattery, we are calling to mind the things that God has actually done for us.

As Isaiah says, this is done according to God’s *“compassion and many kindnesses.”* Which means that God is doing it for a reason. God is compassionate and kind because God loves us.

In verse 9 Isaiah reminds us that *“In all of [our] distress [God] too [is] distressed.”* God feels the pain we feel. God comprehends our anxiety and so would relieve us of it. I don’t think we should look on God as this impassive being who sits up in heaven and watches down on us as if we are some ant-hill to be stirred up on occasion. No, God does want peace and fellowship for us and with us in this life. Why else would our God send Jesus Christ into our history? Why else would Christ become human as well as divine in this fallen world? To save us from ourselves, but also to know what it is to be human.

We need to know that God wants to help us. And that is one reason we do lift our voices in praise of God, not because God needs the praise, but because we need to be reminded, and reminded often of how much God actually does do for us, every day, every hour, every minute. Oh, yeah and there was

that one time God sent his only son to take away our sins. We need to remember that as well. And Isaiah takes note of this in verse 8 when he writes, *“Surely they are my people, children who will be true to me; and so he became their savior.”*

And so, what have we learned? That God is with us, watching over us and caring for us, even in time of calamity. That God cares for us, bringing us comfort and hope, bringing us love. That God sends us help, first in the form of Jesus Christ and secondly in the form of each other. God gave us life. God gives us all that is good. And for all that God gives us, we should say “praise be to God.”

Let us pray...

Blessed God, you are indeed great in that you made the heavens and the earth. Yet you are caring and loving, coming down to be in the world on our level. Lord help us to see our glory. Lift us up. This we pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord.

ἀμήν