

First Presbyterian Church of Plymouth, Michigan

Summer in the Psalms: Psalm 65, A Psalm of Creation

Sunday, August 9, 2020
Rev. Emily Campbell

Rev. Emily Campbell Announcement and Opening Prayer

Friends, welcome to worship and thank you for joining us from wherever you are in the world today. As you can see, we are not in our church building; we're actually in Susan Underhill's beautiful front yard and we are here filming today because our church has made the difficult decision this past week to suspend live worship services until that time when the Covid rates once again begin to fall within our community and within our state. There has been a marked increase and due to that we at the church feel it's in the best health and safety interests of everyone within, not only our church family, but within our community and surrounding neighborhoods, if we suspend meeting together in order to protect each other's health.

The act of worship is of course essential to our faith, yet it is not essential that our worship take place in the church building. By God's grace we have other options, safer options, in which we can meet and although our live worship services are suspended and although the church building currently remains closed to face to face meetings, the church itself is most definitely *open*. In many ways as a church we are working harder than we ever have to provide additional mission opportunities as well as providing more opportunities for you to connect on line through Bible studies, educational classes, and prayer meetings, many of which will be announced in the coming weeks as we move closer to the fall schedule. We appreciate your prayers for our church and for our church staff throughout this process and we will reopen again for live worship services and for face to face meetings when it is safe and healthy for us to reconvene.

There will be a backpack drive for foster children within the surrounding Detroit area and this backpack drive is taking place on Thursday August 20th between 1:00 PM and 6:00 PM in our church parking lot. You can find a list of all the needed supplies for each grade level on our church website and also in our Friday email. This outlines the needs of the foster children.

In addition to that, I want to let you know that our church will be holding a congregational meeting on Sunday August 23rd at 11:00 AM via Zoom format. Now the purpose of this meeting is to elect a new class of elders and deacons and the list of nominees who have agreed to serve our church, if they are so elected to this role, is found on our church's website and again within the body of our Friday email. In order to make this Zoom vote valid we need a minimum of 80 people to be on this zoom gathering, so we do ask that members of our church pre-register for this congregational meeting on our church's website. We will send you a Zoom invitation on the Friday prior to the congregational vote, so please mark your calendars now for Sunday August 23rd at 11:00 AM and please sign up to vote.

Will you all please pray with me. Loving Lord, creation sings of your glory, our lives speak of your presence, of your purpose, and of your peace. May our hearts sing also, dear God. To you may we sing of your love, faithfulness, and of your grace. Receive our worship today as our spiritual offering. May we draw near to you in this time together. This we pray in the name of Jesus Christ, your son, our savior. Amen.

Scripture Lesson: Psalm 65 A psalm of David. A song.

- ¹ Praise awaits you, our God, in Zion; to you our vows will be fulfilled.
² You who answer prayer, to you all people will come.
³ When we were overwhelmed by sins, you forgave our transgressions.
⁴ Blessed are those you choose and bring near to live in your courts!
We are filled with the good things of your house, of your holy temple.
- ⁵ You answer us with awesome and righteous deeds, God our Savior,
the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas,
⁶ who formed the mountains by your power, having armed yourself with
strength,
⁷ who stilled the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves,
and the turmoil of the nations.
⁸ The whole earth is filled with awe at your wonders; where morning
dawns,
where evening fades, you call forth songs of joy.
- ⁹ You care for the land and water it; you enrich it abundantly.
The streams of God are filled with water to provide the people with
grain,
for so you have ordained it.
¹⁰ You drench its furrows and level its ridges; you soften it with showers
and bless its crops.
¹¹ You crown the year with your bounty, and your carts overflow with
abundance.
¹² The grasslands of the wilderness overflow; the hills are clothed with
gladness.
¹³ The meadows are covered with flocks and the valleys are mantled with
grain;
they shout for joy and sing.

Sermon

Would you all please pray with me. Holy God, creation sings of your majesty and glory. I pray today that our lives would sing a song of your faithfulness and love. Open our eyes to your word and to your work in the world, so we may see and celebrate the beauty of your creative genius. This we pray through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Friends, these past three weeks I feel as if we have been on a rather fateful journey through the Psalms, and this journey has miraculously mirrored our own experience of worship. Two weeks ago, some of you may remember that our attention was turned to Psalm 84. Within that Psalm, the psalmist declared his deep longing to return to the House of God. We echoed that longing to be like the Sparrow who flies into the House of God and builds its nest near the altar of God.

Last week a limited number of us gathered in the sanctuary for our first live worship service together. Our longing had been realized! In that service, whether you watched it online or in person, we reflected on the teaching of Psalm 133, which proclaims how good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity. That Psalm celebrates the overflowing blessing of being in fellowship together and last week we celebrated the blessing of being able to worship together.

Today the psalmist draws our attention outside. Psalm 65 declares the whole earth is filled with awe at God's wonders. This Psalm leads us outside at the precise time that our church has to suspend its live worship services due to the increased spread of the virus. So our praise today once again echoes that offered by the psalmist as we recognize that the whole of creation declares its praise to God and we join our praise with that of creation today. Now the fateful part of this journey is that all of this-- our study of the psalms-- was planned months ago, really, as Covid was just a word. We were beginning to understand what its meaning was. We had no idea how this pandemic might progress. We had no idea at what point we would find ourselves when we studied these Psalms. Additionally, we put these Psalms together in no particular order. We simply chose psalms that we thought offered a wide range of personal experiences. It is by God's grace that these psalms have fallen into order in the exact same way that our lives and experience of worship have progressed. I do not think that this is a coincidence. I think it is God's handiwork! I also think that it is God's invitation for us to learn from the psalmists and the experience that the psalmists had at each point in their life of faith. In the way that the psalmists had to face the challenges of faith in their day and age, like us, the psalmists of old longed for normality. They had a deep longing to return to the House of God to worship. The psalmists also knew the importance of celebrating the unity and the blessing of being together.

In our Psalm today it's clear that the psalmist also knew how to see God and appreciate God outside the House of God but within the whole of nature. That is where we find ourselves today, standing before the whole of nature, seeking God's presence, God's guidance, and God's peace. Rather than us spending time focusing on what is wrong in our world or what is wrong in our lives or what is wrong in the life of the church, our hearts would do well, instead, to focus on God's creative genius. Remember that God whom we worship is not only our redeemer and sustainer, but our God is also our creator and God's creative work within us never stops. Every day God is providing us with new reasons to sing his praise and if we stop and take the time necessary to look around us we will see in every tree, every leaf, every flower, in every animal, God's handiwork.

One of my favorite verses of scripture is actually found in Psalm 65, that we are studying today. It says in the second half of verse 8, "Where morning dawns, where evening fades, you call forth songs of joy". In other words, in every sunrise and every sunset God has gifted us with something beautiful and unique, an occasion for praise. Even when life is at its worse the sky still sings of God's faithfulness, beauty and grace.

The first four versus all list the traditional ways we typically draw near to God. In verse 2, we are reminded that we feel close to God in times of answered prayer. In verse 3, our experience of forgiveness is highlighted as another way in which we feel close to God. In verse 4, being in God's house and experiencing the blessings found there is another way listed in which we feel near to God. But from verse six through the end of Psalm 65, nature is the pathway put forth by which we see and experience God. The focus within those latter verses, from verse 6 onwards, the focus on the mountains and the seas and the land, is a helpful reminder to us that at times all of us must look beyond our own life experience and look at the wider work of God.

Psalm 121 actually says it so beautifully:

"I lift up my eyes to the mountains—
where does my help come from?
² My help comes from the LORD,
the Maker of heaven and earth".

Through the centuries, God's people have found encouragement, comfort and strength by looking at God's faithfulness on display throughout the creative world.

In the 18th century, that great hymn writer Isaac Watts wrote these well-known lyrics in his hymn, "I Sing the Mighty Power of God". He wrote,

I sing the mighty pow'r of God, that made the mountains rise,
That spread the flowing seas abroad, and built the lofty skies.
I sing the wisdom that ordained the sun to rule the day;
The moon shines full at His command, and all the stars obey.

In the 19th century, English poet and Jesuit priest Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote, in his poem, "God's Grandeur",

*The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed.*

In the 20th century, the late Irish Catholic priest John O'Donohue, in his great book, "Walking in Wonder: Eternal Wisdom for A Modern World", wrote

*"May you take time to celebrate the quiet miracles of life that seek no attention.
Those miracles occur in God's natural world every single day".*

Psalms 65 is a call for us to do just that, to celebrate the small quiet miracles of life. In verses 9 through 13 of Psalm 65 we are reminded that God provides generously for the land in ways that are both nourishing and beautiful. The Psalm says, "The hills are clothed with gladness, the meadows are covered with flocks, the valleys are clothed with grain, and all of them sing and shout for joy".

Friends, if our God provides for the whole earth like this with such care and with such ample provision, why would we ever doubt that God will provide for *us*? Friends, the reality of our situation today is this it may be a while before we are able to come back together in worship. It may be even longer before our worship is able to return to what it once was, with choirs and celebration, and we may feel as if we have lost our familiar pathways to God. But like the psalmist, God calls us to find new pathways.

Let us never forget that God's creative work continues within us and within the whole world. I have no doubt that God will continue to shape our lives and the life of our church and the life of the world in the future. We will become something beautiful because we are designed by a beautiful creator. Friends, as we reflect on all that God has done in nature I pray that our praise today would echo the whole of the creative world in singing joy and thanksgiving to God. Amen.

Prayers of the People and Benediction

Would you all please pray with me. Merciful God, we praise you for your transformative love and grace within creation and within our hearts. You see potential even when we see nothing but mess. We praise you, dear God, for shaping our lives with your forgiveness and persistent love. We praise you, dear God, for shaping the challenges in our lives into occasions of your grace. We pray today for anyone living with great challenges. We pray today for anyone in need. We pray for those in need of work, for those in need of a place to live. We pray for those in need of protection from the virus. We pray for anyone who needs comfort in grief, healing from illness, friendship and fellowship to fight loneliness. Create healing in our world from this pandemic, dear God, we pray. Help us to trust in your timing, in your purposes, and in the gift of your peace. This we pray in the name and for the sake of Jesus Christ, your son, who taught us, when we pray together to say, Our father who art in heaven; hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

Friends, let us go from here today with grateful hearts, praising God our creator, redeemer, and sustainer. Let us go from here, open to God's creative process at work in our hearts, in our lives today. And as we go, may the blessing of God almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit rest upon you and upon all those whom you love, this day and forever more. Amen.