

“Breath of Life”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church

Psalm 150

September 3, 2017 - Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

When I was a 7th grader, English guitarist and singer-songwriter Eric Clapton did something very rare.

This was back when MTV had something to do with music. Their “Unplugged” series had artists giving acoustic performances, and in one of these, Clapton started a song by saying, “See if you can spot this one.” What followed was a haunting, jazzy shuffle version of “Layla” — a song that had been a hit as a rock anthem an octave higher for Clapton in the early 1970s with Derek and the Dominos. The “Unplugged” version of “Layla” was played more than any other song in 1992 and won the Grammy Award for Best Rock Song the following year.

The rare part, in my mind, was that Clapton managed to make two different recordings of a song become the *definitive version* of that song. If I say “White Christmas” to you, I’m willing to bet my Red Rider BB Gun that Bing Crosby’s voice pops into your head. I bet there’s a song that Dolly Parton has covered and you don’t care in the least who sang it first. In our heads, we know that songs are compositions that can be interpreted by artists. But in our hearts, for many songs, “the song” *is* that one recording of it that everyone else is just copying.

I’ve heard some of you sing karaoke. You sing *Grease* or Beyonce or the Indigo Girls or Johnny Cash or Neil Diamond or Garth Brooks or Madonna or Sir Mix-a-lot or Bonnie Raitt or ABBA with all the flair and quirks that those artists brought to their original recordings. And that’s what we want from a wedding band, right? We don’t want to hear their spin on a classic. We want to hear it so we can sing along to it. And we certainly don’t want to hear anything they’ve written themselves.

But if we think about, this phenomenon — there being a definitive version of a piece of music — is a recent one. Until we could record and distribute music commercially, all we had was the live version, different every time. A piece of music existed in a more ethereal way. A song was “the song” whenever it was sung, in whatever voice, with whatever accompaniment was available.

Psalm 150 calls us to praise God with trumpet and lute and harp and tambourine and dance and strings and pipe and with clanging cymbals — with loud clashing cymbals! The psalmist calls upon every instrument known at the time. Imagine the noise! It might not meld into harmony. It might be messy.

I once took my wife to a performance of the Acro-Cats in Chicago. It was an hour of a woman

showing off tricks with her more-or-less trained cats. But the showstopper was the finale: the Rock Cats, an all cat rock band. One cat flailed at a miniature piano. Another was fitted with tiny drumsticks and played a snare drum indifferently. Another strummed a guitar, but the look on his face said “bass player.” There was a cat who played the cowbell. And to top it all off, there was a guest musician — a chicken pecking at a stack of cymbals. It was the chicken that made me think “I have made interesting choices in my life.” But all around me, the cat lovers were mesmerized. It wasn’t melodious. It was bizarre. But it brought the audience great joy. It was, after all, a cat rock band! Incredible! I sometimes think God must hear the cacophony of all our praise and think, “Incredible!”

There is no one, proper way to praise God. We all dance differently and we are all cats playing different instruments at our own tempo and the psalmist says “bring it all on!”

If you’re a trumpeter, trumpet! If you’re a lutist, play that lute to the glory of God! If you’re a caregiver, praise God with your caregiving! If you’re a teacher, praise God with your teaching! If you’re a scientist, praise God with your research! If you’re a lawyer, praise God with your advocacy! If you work with your hands, praise God with the things you create! If your work is in service, praise God in all that you provide! If you’re a student, praise God with your determination! If you’re retired, praise God with what you decide to do each day!

Whatever your talent, whatever your labor, know that none of it is too ordinary or too loud, too vulgar, too jazzy, too hard rock, too punk, or too experimental to praise God. This is the psalms, y’all, nothing gets filtered out.

Let everything that breathes praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!

In Sunday School this summer, we studied the book of Psalms, and what we found was some tear-evoking praise, some joyful thanksgiving, and a whole lot of heartbreaking lament. And at the end, after one hundred forty-nine honest conversations with God, we get this exclamation point, this extended call to praise. It seems intentional that it is the close of the book. The psalmist is brutally candid about the breadth of human emotion. Fear, anger, despondency, envy, revenge, and exhaustion are all given honest treatments. But none of them get the final word. The final word is *praise*.

This isn’t “Don’t Worry, Be Happy.” It’s a deep call to a faith refined through the fires of life — a faith that can go through the valley of the shadow of death and, in the final word, praise.

Maybe this is important to hear in a week in which we’ve seen so much destruction in Texas. The footage could be the backdrop for one of the psalms of lament. The final word is praise. Child of this church Joe Silvie and his National Guard unit are using their God-given breath to report to Houston for rescue work, and logistics, and recovery. At some point, as Houston rebuilds, we will be asked to respond with our breath. And we will go. And we will help.

Let everything that breathes praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!

The Hebrew name for the book of Psalms is *tehillim*, which simply means “praises.” The psalms begin by telling us how important the Torah — the Law — is as a way of life. And here at the end, we understand that a life lived with God’s word inscribed on your heart leads to a life of praise. All of these praises throughout the psalms — the praises that come in comfort, in grief, in despair, in disorientation — these praises build to the final psalm, telling us to *Praise the Lord*. It starts by telling us to praise God in the sanctuary, but quickly moves to the “mighty firmament” — that’s everywhere. Praise God in all of creation! Take these songs of praise, and take them out to your daily life and sing them. Bring them to your family, and to your relationships and to your play and to your labor. The final word is praise.

Every verse of Psalm 150 includes the imperative form of the verb *hillel* (“to praise”) with a shortened version of the holy name YHWH added on. You do that linguistic algebra and you get the word *halelûyah*. Now, Presbyterians will willingly utter the word “hallelujah” on precisely three occasions. First, if they are singing or referencing the “Hallelujah Chorus” of Handel’s *Messiah*. Second, if the preacher puts it into the liturgy and it is printed on the page so that everyone will say it at the same time, decently and in order. And finally, we will say “hallelujah” when we want to gently parody a more excitable group of Christians, as in “man, I went to this funeral the other day and it was all, ‘Hallelujah!’ What a fascinating cultural experience!”

We Presbyterians tend to play a more subdued instrument in this band. But we are still called to play it with all we’ve got. We are to take the breath that God has given us, and use it to praise God in every measure.

We praise God in our worship, of course.

We also praise God with our wallets and with where we are willing to walk.

We praise God in how we choose to interact with other members of the band.

We praise God in our willingness to have hard conversations and to encounter tough realities.

How will we praise God this fall? There’s a Habitat House to be built in Ensley. There are conversations about mental illness to be had. There are children in Birmingham and Talladega and Haiti to be fed. There is worship every Sunday! There is music to be played and sung. There are neighbors to get to know. There are vulnerable people to be protected. There are injustices to stand against. There is terrible theology to denounce. There is love to celebrate.

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!

For such a simple psalm

There sure is a lot of work to do. Amen.