



“GOOD COMPANY”

SCRIPTURE: PSALM 111: 1-10

GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC

Sunday, January 28, 2024

The Rev. Dr. Marcia Whitney Mount Shoop, Pastor

Psalm 111:1-10

Congregation Sung Refrain

Praise the Lord! With my whole heart I give thanks.

111:1 Praise the LORD! I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation. 111:2 Great are the works of the LORD, studied by all who delight in them. 111:3 Full of honor and majesty is God’s work, and God’s righteousness endures forever.

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111:4 God has gained renown by wonderful deeds; the LORD is gracious and merciful. 111:5 God provides food for those who fear God, and is ever mindful of God’s covenant. 111:6 God has shown the people the power of God’s works.

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111:7 The works of God’s hands are faithful and just; all God’s precepts are trustworthy. 111:8 They are established forever and ever, to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness. 111:9 God sent redemption to the people; God has commanded a covenant forever. Holy and awesome is God’s name. 111:10 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. God’s praise endures forever.

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The Word of the LORD

Thanks be to God

Location, location, location
That's what the real estate people say
When you are going to invest, when you're
Going to stay
Get the lay of the land
Get your bearings, do your homework,
Know your place, where you stand.

We know that whole mantra is loaded
Coded with all the things the economy
Takes from community.
It shakes us, breaks us, and rakes us
Over the coals, in the competition
it doles into perception
Stands us on cliffs and begins
The deception
Tells us to play along, go with the throng
Don't get ever, ever get anything wrong
When it comes to what's at stake
Stop trying to make, just focus on
The take
The money, money, money.
The funny things is
Money can't buy you
Happiness, but we
Sure keep trying to tell
Ourselves it might
So it's worth the blight
The slight of hands that
Tells us some must be at the bottom
And just a small few on the top
That's the only way
This economy can run non-stop
We mistaken it for a map
For our path, a trap that
Keeps us stuck and distracted
From the truth.

Back in the day, the psalms
Were written to call the people

Home

They were written for worship
For getting things untwisted
They were written to teach
To remind people why they existed.
Things were not all that different
From now
In some kind of ways
Those ancestors, well they
spent their days led and fed
By the economy,
They would forget the astronomy
Their place in the scheme
They'd forget to dream
They'd get caught up in
Consumption, presumption, corruption,
Self-destruction
And they'd need someone
to call them
Back to the center, back to the reason
we are here
Back to the truth, loud and clear,
The sincere,
Back to the core, the heart,
And yes, back to the fear.

Now don't be afraid of the fear
You actually need it. It's a stitch
God threaded through us
So we would know when we see it
Fear, here, is not about abuse or neglect.
This fear is not trauma or wounding
Fear of God is our gut telling us when we are
On Holy Ground.
It is awe, it is utterly,
And incomparably profound.
That's when we know we are centered and true,
When we know we're not God
-not me and not you.

The Fear part is wonder, it's reverence,
Admiration.
It's knowing God's works–
The ones like creation, revelation, imagination,
Inspiration, communication, demonstration,
Confrontation, motivation.
Those kind of
Works–the mysterious, the wonderful,
The powerful, the unfathomable, ineffable,
Those works are the reason we congregate,
We celebrate, we dedicate, we emulate,
we fear losing connection with
The power at the heart of all things
God is the one who keeps us
Tethered to our place on the wings
Of hope that can elevate, alleviate
Our fears that all is lost.

The psalmists were many, and scattered across
Decades and contexts and social positions
But one common thread is they were
All located in systems of oppressions
Some were comfortable, but more were
Crying out because
they felt injustices the most.
They weren't looking for reasons to boast,
They were singing the songs
of staying alive
With hope, with joy, with trust
in God's promises.
They were calling people in to
Learn again and again and again

Our location is never outside of God's hand
All things unfold in God's time, in God's
Mysterious and merciful mind.
We get lost when we forget that about
Ourselves. That we are held, that we are
Embraced. That we are created with purpose,
attention to detail, and so much grace.

Now these psalms are disparate and scattered
About—some of them memories of a life
Long ago, when things were as they should be
Before the Roman army occupied,
Before the people of God learned
The scourge and the purge called
Genocide.

That's etched in our DNA as a human race
That sometimes our own
Turns on us—and tells us we are
A disgrace. That we are not worth
The air that we breathe. Our own species
Can tell us we are other than them
That we are under, that we are
Plunder of the endless wars of
Superiority, of the theft of all our humanity,
Mine and yours.

The psalmists wrote songs in exile, in
Betrayal, in pain. Psalmists sang when
All was lost, when everything was
Going down the drain—everything was
Changing. No one knows who to trust.
The things we thought we could count on
Are gone. They are not coming back.
Are we are wandering in a wilderness
With no direction to follow
No horizon, no landmarks, no pathways.
Our ancestors fed on their sorrow in those
Days of utter devastation. They got an
Education in disorientation, separation,
Isolation, in the loss of civilization.
They were schooled in exploitation,
humiliation, domination,
desecration, desolation.
The psalmists sang in those graveyards,
Those waste lands, those washed out roads.

God's people were taught to sing from

Their prisons, their solitary confinement.
They were taught to hold on to their dignity,
Their God-given right to create, to believe,
To be a part of a liberated world, freed to be...
Free to just be.

The psalmists wrote songs to remind us
That when things fall apart, God is right here
beside us.

We are never lost in God's sight.
Our relationship can always become
Right
God is here, God is there.
God is everywhere we are
The GPS that actually works
When things are the hardest
God's the poet of the world.
The artist who sees your
True colors and loves how
They play with the tones and hues
Of the needs and dreams of our day.

Fear of God is our capacity to be humble,
To be awed by a love so powerful
At the heart of all that is, that
Each of us has a part to play
In the world being healed
From the ways humans have
Lost our way.
Share your location and God is already here
This humility is not self-loathing, it is
A deep surrender to God's love and power
The fear of God does not call you to cower
But to understand the way you are made
For a bold purpose, not just for you,
But for us.

That's why the psalmists called people
To come—come to the company of
People who delight in these truths

That God loves an honest congregation
One that sees the real situation
Clear on our call, unashamed of the praises
We sing for a God whose works
Are the wonderful things

The eruptions of love
when hate is on the march.
The reorientation to justice
when oppression
Has us parched.
The healing of the nations when destruction
Seems imminent.
We're in good company, when we
Find ourselves in the remnant
of those still willing to sing—
not righteous because
We're right about everything,
but because
We know our location, location, location
In the big picture scheme
We are not afraid to dream

So our praises are not foolish to us,
They are food for our souls,
They quench our thirst for a
Reorientation toward what defines us
As people—we are made for connection,
For joy and for love,
We are here to rebuild, to remember,
And to write new songs
That tell stories in the midst of
The throngs that gather in the name
Of God our redeemer, our creator, our
Sustainer—the pulse of vitality that calls us
To gather
and believe in something beyond
Ourselves, in something in spite of
The odds, in something that breaks
through all our facades.

When there is grief, when we languish,
We bring that here, too.
Because that, that anguish is TRUE.
And the truth is how we lock in
To the healing this journey
Promises to bring.
That's why we gather, why we praise,
why, with all our hearts,
we sing.

Congregation Sung Refrain

Praise the Lord! With my whole heart I give thanks. (repeated and move into the prayers)