

Joy

Psalm 95

Seventh of series: Developing Mature Character in the Psalmonic School of Prayer

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Worship at 8:30, 10, and 11:30 a.m.

Hallelujah! Praise the Lord! Let's celebrate!

Are you uncomfortable? It's one thing if the choir sings that moment of celebration to cry out and shout. It's another if the preacher starts breaking out. Presbyterians have a hard time with emotional outbursts, particularly from preachers. We tend to be a cerebral and stoic people. Just take a look around you. Joy makes us nervous. Psalm 95 is that psalm that invites us into joy when we don't feel like it.

Let's take a moment to pray: In our hesitancy, in our resistance, in our ambivalence, great God of salvation, pour forth your water of life upon us that we might have joy in the midst of trouble. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

I have a confession to make, and that is, as I was preparing for the sermon, I became nervous. I have a personal problem with joy. I grew up in a context where joy was manufactured, and it was often hypocritical. We Presbyterians are not guilty of that. I grew up Pentecostal. If you did not show joy, there was something wrong with your salvation. I enjoyed being around Presbyterians because they had normal emotions. When it was time to be sad, they were sad. When it was time to be glad, they were glad. We cannot get away from the fact that Psalm 95 calls us at the beginning to sing to the Lord and make a joyful noise. Presbyterians don't clap; Presbyterians don't shout. Presbyterians don't typically get emotional or irrational. We don't lose control; we don't break out; we don't become kinesthetic in our worship and move around in the aisles. We don't seem to get excited. We remain cool, calm, collected, constrained, contained, and controlled. We like our preachers to do the same. We do have these moments in baptisms, like today's, where we can have a smile, which is as close to ecstatic joy as we get. When we celebrate Communion, we celebrate the memorial side of the event like the Baptists do. We remember that Jesus died. We have a hard time with the invitation into the festival banquet of eternity. You don't find too many smiling Presbyterians around the Lord's Supper. There's a certain sacramental sobriety that we keep when we are celebrating in worship. The Hebrew word that invites us to make a joyful noise is exactly that. It is not even organized sound; it is a mass of people crying out as if they were going into battle. It's the kind of cry you would hear at a football game. It is the kind of cry you would hear when people are excited about a particular event and the crowd is cheering. We tend to get nervous around that kind of emotional exuberance in worship. But there is a discipline we are invited into here that brings balance to our concern and ambivalence. In this psalm there is a theology that is clear about the nature of God. God saves people. We belong to God. God owns the whole universe. We come to God with adoration and praise. And out of that moment of adoration and praise we are open to hear what God has to say to us. The word that God wants to say to us today is: Do not sacrifice your joys on the altar of hardening your hearts.

Listen to the word of God and the promise. The song leads to the sermon; our worship leads to the word; our praise leads to the proclamation; our wonder of who God is leads to listening to God's warning. Our joy means that we are open to the possibility of God's judgment. Our cheer invites us into receiving the challenge of God.

The Reformed order of worship is also modeled here in the Psalms. We are called to worship and, in ecstatic utterance, we sing a hymn of praise. There is a litany of adoration: "Come before God. Let us bow down." There are acts of humility, where the word is worship of God. The literal word is: Make yourself prostrate before God. Fling yourself down in God's presence. Bow, bend over, and kneel before God. All are actions of the body. We Presbyterians get nervous around too much body action in worship. We put our pews close enough together so you couldn't kneel even if you wanted to kneel! My sense is that this psalm is not only a theological, but an emotional, reality check. At some point we need to express our exuberance for the goodness of God. We need to have a 'stadium effect.' In the Hebrew pattern of life, if you didn't have a good time to cheer then you would probably turn that exuberance inward among yourselves and become an organization of complaint. Make a joyful noise and don't harden your heart.

Often at sport events we can see the contrast of the two. My wife and I were greatly blessed to be at the December 5th Redskins-Giants game, when the Redskins won -- they actually scored some touchdowns. There was the sound of winners in the camp. It wasn't too long after, we heard the sound of losers -- when the Pacers and the Pistons got together and not only played a basketball game, but had a major fight with the crowd and each other.

God is saying choose between one or the other. Will you participate in cheering and praise, or will you become a congregation of complaint and quarreling?

In preparation for the sermon, I wanted to go to Barnes and Noble and have a nice cup of Starbucks coffee in a quiet place. I got my coffee, sat down and started working on the sermon. Within a couple of moments a woman came in with two screaming children; and they really went at it for quite a few minutes. The silence of Barnes and Noble was ricocheting the sound of two upset children. I was praying, "Lord, please remove them quickly." Not too long after that a very chatty woman came to the counter and she wanted to tell the person at the counter everything about her life. She told more than I wanted to know or he wanted to know. She kept talking incessantly. I prayed that the Lord would remove her quickly, too. Not long after that a fellow came who did not speak English very well but was interested in the right cup of coffee and he was a little bit confused as to what to do or what to say to the person at the counter. He got his latte and began to go out the door. The problem was, the door was where I was seated, and it had an alarm on it, because it said, "Do not exit in case of emergency." The alarm went off throughout the entire building. I was beginning to get irritated when it occurred to me that God usually takes me through something for the sermon.

One of our temptations is to let the stuff of life spin, multiply, and amplify, so that we become more and more irritated and irritable. Worship is an intervention on that. At least once or twice a week we can intentionally participate in the shouts of joy, the singing of hymns. Or we will continue to multiply in our corporate complaint. We will spin the mutual irritation with each other. We will amplify the anger... magnify the misery... and multiply the malevolent. God knows our temptation. C. Leslie Charles in her book, *Why Is Everyone So Cranky?* describes ten trends that make us angry and what we can do about them. 1. compressed time; 2. communication overload; 3. disconnectedness in our world that is trying to be connected; 4. increasing costs; 5. competition; 6. customer contact (there's too much customer contact); 7. computers; 8. change; 9. coming of age (which means aging); and 10. complexity. All of these things make us more and more difficult to live with. She writes that the reason our expectations grate on each other is that we come to the table with an emphasis on our personal life and not on the communal benefit. Things I'm entitled to when I want them. 'My time is important; I shouldn't be inconvenienced.' 'I have a right to be rude.' 'I'm a taxpayer; I own part of this road.' 'I'll drive as fast as I want.' 'I deserve to be happy even if it costs you.' 'I can cheat a little bit, it won't hurt anybody.' 'I can take what I want when I want it.' 'I'm too busy to be polite,' and on and on. We have a culture that will spin our criticism and our crankiness, our grouchiness and our grumpiness. There's a similar pattern that this psalm addresses. The words, Massah and Meribah, are reflected in Exodus 17 and Numbers 20. Massah is what God calls a place of testing in the Old Testament when the people were upset. They were in the middle of the wilderness without enough food, without enough water, and it was getting difficult. Frankly, they had a right to be irritated. But it was a test: it was a Massah. The test was to see if they could learn that God would be faithful to them in the midst of their struggle in the wilderness. The second word is Meribah, which has to do with complaints – contention, strife, quarreling. While they were in this place of testing, they got testier and testier. They began to spin their frustrations with one another, and they got to the point where they became a mob and almost killed Moses. God is saying: There is a way to practice life differently, rather than giving-in to the obnoxious, irritable behavior. It is for the people of God to practice making a joyful noise on a regular basis. It is to invest in the order of worship and the discipline of prayer so that we will not give-in to the temptation to spin out our anxiety and frustration with one another and with God.

Are you in a circle of people who tend to gossip or chew on other people? Are you in a company or on a team that tends to spin out their anxiety and reinforce it? Psalm 95 is inviting us to move away from that kind of behavior. Even if we don't feel the joy, it is a call to participate in joyous noise. When we call attention to the nature of who God is in our presence, we are in the presence of a God who is gracious, kind and generous. When life gets tough, we do not spin the complaint. The result of repetitive resistance is that we will get harder. "Do not harden your hearts," Psalm 95 says. Do not become cruel, fierce, churlish, impudent, and obstinate. Do not tighten up and become narrow-minded and obnoxious. Do not give-in to unresolved anger for the spinning of irritation, or the feeding of frustration. Invest in the discipline of times of praise of the adoration of God. The complaint of one day can turn into the bitterness of weeks of complaints. The irritation of one day can turn into a lifetime of irreconcilable differences. The quarreling turns to arguing... to attacking... to abuse... to divorce... and to death. Payback turns to persecution, and vindictiveness turns to revenge. If we develop a habit of hostility, we have missed the point of worship.

Worship says: choose your pattern of God. Praise God even if you don't feel like it. Participate with the congregation in the joyful noise and release all of this frustration. Choose to be open, pliable, and soft – or become hardened. And the term here is the same term that is used to describe Pharaoh when he would not let the people go: he became 'hardened of heart.' The people in the wilderness became hardened of heart because they kept looking at the dark side and the negative side. They refused to recognize that God had intervened and was gracious to them. . A biblical teacher that my father listened to for many years, put it in two words: You can become 'bitter' or 'better;' it's up to you, in the letter "I." What are you going to do about it? Parents, are you going to show your children how to be gracious or grumpy? Officers, are we going to show our congregation how to be helpful or hurtful? Bosses, spouses, teachers, leaders, whoever has responsibility for community of people, are we going to model the release of negativity or are we going to model an increase of it?

The psalm says, remember God's salvation. There's an irony here; the rock of salvation is the same rock that pours out water when Moses strikes it with his staff. God asked him to speak to it, but Moses was angry too. Or that same rock can be a rock of judgment. When people who become brittle, dry, and argumentative fall upon that rock, they are crushed and crashed to pieces. Choose this day: Will you be a person of praise and celebration, or a person of pugilism and resistance?

The order of worship is our order of life. Invest in the good things that God has given – or be given over to the hardening of your heart.

Jesus took upon himself, once and for all, all of the hardness, obstinacy and resistance that we have to offer, on the cross. God modeled for us, once and for all, that even God will not give-in to vindication and revenge. God will absorb all of the pain and give rest.

And so joy is about discipline. It's not about being pumped up. It's about participating with people in the celebration of who God is – so that we are not driven by our anxiety and our anger. In Jesus Christ, we no longer have to amplify the pain, spin the complaint, magnify the quarrel or multiply the rage. We can lay it all on him, and he can pour out joy because we are released from that in worship today. Do not harden your hearts. Make a joyful noise. Let it roar, let it rattle, break out. Don't stuff it; let it go.

Amen.