**Sunday August 29, 2021**

**“God is our Helper” (Psalm 146)**

The book of Psalms ends on a high note with a beautiful expression of *praise to God*. The last five Psalms (146-150) in the psalter are called the *Hallelujah Psalms* because they all begin and end with the words “Hallelujah,” which means, “Praise the Lord” or “Praise ye the Lord.” These five *Hallelujah Psalms* show an interesting progression of praise that moves from the individual to the community, and finally to the entire creation. The book of Psalms culminates with this wonderful declaration - “*Let everything that has breath, praise the Lord*.” (Psalm 150:6). Psalm 146 is the first of these five psalms and so it begins with “hallelujah,” which is a call for each one of us to praise the Lord (verse 1). The psalmist then speaks to himself, exhorting his very soul to praise the Lord (verse 1) and in response he vows to praise God for his entire life. He promises, “*I will praise the Lord as long as I live. I will sing praises to my God with my dying breath”* (verse 2).

All this talk about *praising God* should compel us to ask, what does it mean to praise God? To praise God is to express our adoration of God for his character and activity. This involves the mind, the body, and the spirit. True praise begins when the Spirit of God touches our human spirit. The words of the chorus, “Set my spirit free that I may worship Thee,” reveal the basis of worship (Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline,* p. 138-39). Praising God also incorporates the inward aspects of thought, volition, and emotion. Our thoughts are focused on who God is and what he has done for us, our emotions of love, joy, and gratitude toward God find expression in praise, and our praise of God is intentional and purposeful. Yet praising God is not only limited to the inner life, but also expressed in appropriate physical acts. We use our voices to singor speakour praises to God*.* We adopt different physical postures to express our praise, such as, standing, kneeling, dancing, lying prostrate, bowing our heads, clapping our hands, lifting our hands, and lifting our heads. When we praise God, we celebrate and declare God’s wonderful deeds and his great and gracious nature. This activity engages our whole being and so the “body, mind, spirit, and emotions should all be laid on the altar of worship” (Foster, p. 147).

In most praise psalms the opening call to praise is followed by a statement that gives the reason for praising God. For instance, Psalm 117 begins with a call to praise, “*Praise the Lord, all you nations, extol him, all you peoples”* (verse 1), which is immediately followed by the reason for praise, “*For great is his steadfast love, and the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever”* (verse 2). The theological basis for praising God is made clear in the simple and straightforward declaration, *God is great, and God is good!* God is majestic, high above us, yet God is also compassionate, very near to us. While Psalm 146 fleshes out this understanding of God in its later verses, the explicit reason to praise is absent. In its place we find instruction on *true and false objects of our trust* (verses 3-5). It appears that the psalmist departed from the usual structure of a praise psalm to have a teachable moment with his readers. It’s sometimes very easy to go into autopilot when worshipping God without really reflecting on what’s truly going on in our minds and hearts. Here, the psalmist stops us, his readers, right in their tracks and forces us to think about whom we really are placing our trust and hope in. It’s easy for us to say, “God is great, and God is good,” but it’s quite a different matter to trust him completely.

The psalmist warns his readers not to place their trust in the *great* and *powerful people* who control the affairs of the nation because their time on earth is quite limited (verse 3-4). They are, after all, mere mortals, who one day will breathe their last breath and when that happens their projects and plans will die with them. It doesn’t make much sense to rely on them for help. The better way is to place one’s hope in the Lord, the God of Jacob, the God of history and creation, who has been and will be faithful forever (verses 5 & 6). These words are very timely amid a national election. When I planned the sermons for August, I had no idea that we’d be in middle of an election campaign, so this sermon on Psalm 146 is not intentional in this regard. At the same time, it may be helpful to stop and think more deeply about the psalmist’s words in terms of government.

Certainly, his solemn words about the limitations of political leaders and his warnings against placing our absolute hope in them could contribute to an already deep-seated sense of cynicism about government. On the one hand, we participate in the political process with the hope that things can change for the better. At the same time, we’re a bit jaded by the fact that our leaders make promises that they don’t always keep and the problems that afflict our world never seem to get solved. So, the psalmist’s statement, “*Don’t put your confidence in powerful people, there is no help for you there”* (verse 3) seems to fuel our skepticism about the role of government in our lives. Is the solution to distrust government and to trust God instead? Is this what Psalm 146 is teaching?

The psalm is not condemning human government, but it does recognize that our leaders are only human with clear limitations. They’re not God and they don’t have superpowers. The psalmist is not saying that human government is unnecessary or not useful, but he is challenging us to not put our *unwavering trust* in the system because of its deficiencies. For even if a ruler has good plans and intentions, he is a finite being who will one day be replaced with another leader who may have a different plan. This continual flux within human government is in stark contrast with God *who remains faithful forever* (verse 6). Human government has the power to do good and we’ve experienced this during the pandemic. At the same time, we’ve also had our share of disappointments with our elected leaders. Here, the psalmist is asking us to think about the true source of our help and the real object of our hope. So, are we pinning all our hopes on the various political messiahs who promise to solve all our problems?

Psalm 146 is inviting us to put our *hope* in God as the source of our *help*. The psalmist declares, “*Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God*” (verse 5). We can put our hope in God because God is great, and God is good. *The God of Jacob is our hope*. The Holy Scriptures teach us about God’s powerful and gracious intervention in the lives of his people throughout history. Our hope is in a God whose character and activity are rooted in history. This enables us to have hope in the present and for the future because we know that God is both willing and able to help us since he has lovingly cared for his people in the past. God has a reputation for helping people!

Not only is our God the God of history, but he is also *the God of creation*. The psalmist reminds us, “*He is the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them*” (verse 6). All creation testifies to the greatness and the goodness of our God. When we look all around us, we can easily see the wonder of his creation. Everything speaks of the love and power of God, from the delicate flowers of the field to the Scarborough Bluffs, from the red cardinals in our backyards to the billions of stars in the night sky. God is not some unknown Higher Being who created the universe and then walked away. Our God is passionately interested and involved in his creation. God *“remains faithful forever*” (verse 6). From the first light of creation to the future culmination of all things, God is present and active and his loving purposes for the universe are constant and unchanging. Political leaders may come and go, but God remains faithful forever.

*God is our helper*, and he comes to the aid of those whom the world tends to ignore, reject, and push around. God’s compassion for hurting people is very evident. It’s quite amazing that the Creator of all things reaches down to care for the most vulnerable in the world. “*He gives justice to the oppressed and food to the hungry. The Lord frees the prisoners. The Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are weighed down. The Lord loves the godly. The Lord protects the foreigners among us. He cares for the orphans and widows*” (verse 7 & 8). Psalm 146 is an invitation to put one’s trust in God who is always ready and able to deliver the oppressed, feed the hungry, free the captives, cure the blind, and protect the weak and the powerless. Caring for those who are oppressed, hungry, imprisoned, burdened, newcomers in our land, and vulnerable is at the very heart of God and it should be in our hearts as well! We can put our trust in him because we know that he helps the helpless and will come to our aid in times of trouble.

The psalmist writes, “*The Lord will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations*” (verse 10). God’s kingdom has begun in Jesus and will culminate at some point in the future. Kings and kingdoms come and go, but God’s reign is forever. While we don’t see the full effect of the Kingdom of God at present, we have the hope that one day his Kingdom will fully come, and all the brokenness of creation will be healed. In the meantime, his Kingdom is here and is growing. What, then, is the work of the Kingdom that we, his people, should be engage in? What is in the very heart of God? We should seek justice for the oppressed, give food to the hungry, restore sight to the blind, lift the downtrodden, support newcomers and refugees, and defend the vulnerable.

When we reflect on God’s nature, his majestic power, his infinite wisdom, his unfathomable mercy and love, we cannot help but move into praise. Yet we worship the Lord not only because of who he is but also because of what he has done. Richard Foster writes, “Above all, the God of the Bible is the God who acts. His goodness, faithfulness, justice, mercy all can be seen in His dealings with His people. His gracious actions are not only etched into ancient history, but are engraved into our personal histories. We praise God for who He is, and thank Him for what He has done” (Foster, *Celebration of Discipline,* p. 140). *Hallelujah! Praise the Lord.*