

The Front Porch

Message #5 in the series "Summer Playlist"
The Book of Psalms: God's Songs for Life"

Psalm 98

St. Paul's United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown
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*Sing to the Lord a new song,
for he has done marvelous things;
his right hand and his holy arm
have worked salvation for him.*
² *The Lord has made his salvation known
and revealed his righteousness to the nations.*
³ *He has remembered his love
and his faithfulness to Israel;
all the ends of the earth have seen
the salvation of our God.*
⁴ *Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth,
burst into jubilant song with music;*
⁵ *make music to the Lord with the harp,
with the harp and the sound of singing,*
⁶ *with trumpets and the blast of the ram's horn—
shout for joy before the Lord, the King.*
⁷ *Let the sea resound, and everything in it,
the world, and all who live in it.*
⁸ *Let the rivers clap their hands,
let the mountains sing together for joy;*
⁹ *let them sing before the Lord,
for he comes to judge the earth.*
*He will judge the world in righteousness
and the peoples with equity. (Psalm 98)*

I love homes that have a front porch. When I was growing up, my home was a detached row home – what we would probably call a townhouse today. And it had a front porch. It was small, but always very welcoming. I loved that front porch. I spent a lot of time as a kid on that front porch.

Whether we realize it or not, the front porch is actually a place of decision.

- When someone visits, we determine whether we're letting the person in, or stand guard so they don't come in. In fact, we now have technology that will help us to see who is on our front porch without even going to the door... or without even being at home.
- The front porch is the place where first kisses are often made – and decisions as to whether the relationship is worth pursuing (sometimes based on that first kiss!).
- It's the place where newly married couples officially enter into their new life together.

- The front porch is often where we hang out with friends or family and plan out our dreams of what we want to be when we grow up. I still do that – meaning, I’m still trying to figure out what I want to be when I grow up!
- The front porch can be where we go when we’re waiting for news – either by mail or in person. I remember in my senior year of high school waiting on the front porch for the mail -- to see if I would get college acceptance letters.

You see, **the front porch is an entry point** and we determine there – literally and metaphorically – **what gets into our homes and into our lives.**

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, once described our relationship with God using the metaphor of a house. For him, the **front porch** represented **repentance**. In order to have access to the heart of God – or more specifically, to the grace of God -- we have to come onto the “front porch” – confessing our sin, confessing the brokenness of our relationship with God, and acknowledging our need for a Savior. Then, in his metaphor, we move to the “**front door**” – which, for him, is **faith**. Faith is that moment when we confess that Jesus Christ is our Savior – that He died for our sins and rose from the dead to give new life to all who put their trust in Him. Coming through the front door, we enter into “**the house.**” Wesley believed that **holy living** – or what is known as “sanctification” -- is best represented by the house itself – how we live each and every day of our lives as followers of Jesus. So, we have the front porch, the front door and the house.

Well, I like Wesley’s metaphor. I like that for him, the front porch represents repentance – that place, or that moment in our lives, when we realize that we’re not the ones who are in control of the universe, that we’re not the ones who are the center of the world . . . that only God deserves that role and that every time we try to usurp it from Him, we end up proving how easily we can screw things up.

The front porch is an entry point, and we determine there – literally and metaphorically – what gets into our lives . . . and what has to go out of our lives.

The same is true for worship. Whether we think in terms of Sunday church services or personal devotional times, the front porch – spiritually speaking – is the entry point of our relationship with God in worship.

And **that front porch of worship is praise.**

Praise. As Pastor John mentioned last week when he talked about saying thank you to God, giving praise to God is something that we really want to be good at – but often we’re not. **Genuine praise, you see, starts with acknowledging that God is God, and we are not.** Praise puts us at a place of humility before a God who deserves our worship – the *Only One* who deserves our worship. When we praise God, we verbally acknowledge God’s worthiness, God’s goodness, God’s role as Creator, Sanctifier, and Redeemer. **When we praise God, we bow our hearts and our heads before Him, and we lift our hands in unconditional, humble service to Him.** Bowing our hearts acknowledges that God is our Savior, and that we submit to Him. Bowing our heads before Him acknowledges that God is our Creator, and that all that we are and all that we have comes from Him. Lifting our hands in unconditional service acknowledges that God is Lord of life and Lord of all, and that we give Him our lives as “*a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God,*” as the apostle Paul writes in **Romans 12:1.**

Praise, therefore, is best offered daily, or, better yet, more often than that – and not just when we’re happy or when we’re having a great day or when our prayers are answered or when we

find the best parking spot in front of the main entrance to the grocery store . . . but also when nothing is going our way, and our day is not going well, and even – or perhaps especially – when we’re dealing with difficult or bad news.

For many of us, asking God for things – even with the best of intention – is so much easier than praising God for Who He is . . . no matter what’s going on in our daily lives. But **praise is the front porch of worship.** It’s **our response to coming into God’s all-consuming, self-giving, overwhelmingly loving presence.**

The Book of Psalms actually helps us to learn how to praise . . . because people – like King David – had to struggle with how to do it long before us. And they wrote their praises down so now we can use their words as our songs of praise too.

Take, for example, Psalm 98.

Bible scholars tell us that, historically, Psalm 98 actually was one of seven specific Psalms that were used by the ancient Jewish people at festivals that honored God as King. Those seven Psalms (Psalm 47, 93, 95, 96, 97, 98 and 99) were known as “**Enthronement Psalms**,” and they called on the congregation of Israel to acknowledge God as the King of kings and Lord of lords. Other Psalms talk about God’s enthronement as well. **Psalm 22:3**, for example, tells us that God is “*enthroned on the praises of Israel*.” Picture in your mind what that might look like.

While we don’t do those festivals as part of our Christian tradition, we can still use these Psalms as our songs of praise – songs that acknowledge God for who He is – He is our King, He is our Savior . . . and He is worthy to be enthroned in the center of our lives.

Psalm 98 also has some additional surprises in it – surprises that I didn’t even know before I started studying it for this message.

Look with me at verses 1 – 3 . . .

*¹ Sing to the Lord a new song,
for he has done marvelous things;
his right hand and his holy arm
have worked salvation for him.
² The Lord has made his salvation known
and revealed his righteousness to the nations.
³ He has remembered his love
and his faithfulness to Israel;
all the ends of the earth have seen
the salvation of our God.*

Notice a few things here. First, notice the word “**sing**.” “Sing.” Praising God most certainly can be done with the spoken word. But there’s something powerful that happens when we lift our voices to sing our praises to God. **Singing breaks us out of the entrapping power of our circumstances and reminds us that there is more to life than our pain.** For many of us, the pandemic choked down our song. The harsh realities of COVID-19 prevented many of us from singing – or perhaps for some of us, it even took away our *desire* to sing. It’s time now to reclaim our voice of praise . . . and to sing that praise “to the Lord” from the front porch of our lives.

Notice also that we are to sing to the Lord **"a new song."** In Hebrew that phrase is *shir chadash* – (pronounced, "shear kahdahsh" - שִׁיר חָדָשׁ). In Hebrew, this phrase has a special grammatical construction that tells us that the writer is actually **anticipating how God will act in the future**. In other words, the song that the people are to sing is a song that is to praise God for what He is *going* to do in the future, not just for what he has already done. What the psalmist is saying is, in effect, "Let's sing about what God is going to do – and by our song, create a picture of how we will rejoice when He actually does it." The Psalm writer praises God because even now, he can see the evidence of the salvation God will be bringing. The writer is praising God *in advance* – anticipating the salvation that God will bring to His people.

And that salvation? That's the third thing I want you to notice here. The word that is translated as "salvation" here – or "victory," if you're reading the NRSV translation – is the Hebrew word, *yeshuah*. *Yeshuah* certainly means "salvation." But it's also the basis for the name "Joshua" – or, as it's translated in Greek within the New Testament . . . "Jesus." The names Joshua and Jesus are both based on this Hebrew word -- *yeshuah*. Salvation. And it is repeated three times in these opening three verses of the Psalm. Some Bible scholars believe that this Psalm is a prophecy about the coming Messiah – and that it was written to give an advanced picture of what God *will have accomplished* when that Messiah does come. The last phrase in verse 1 says, *"for he has done marvelous things."* *"He has done marvelous things."*

So, the "new song" that we're to sing in praise of God? It's a song that's meant to point people to God's salvation plan. We, today, know that plan to be Jesus Christ. According to Psalm 98, it's a plan that *"the Lord has made ... known, and revealed ... to the nations."* The word "nations" here in Hebrew is a word that means "all people" – not just the Jewish people, but the non-Jewish people too. God is including both Jews and non-Jews – *all* people – in His salvation plans. Verse 3 says, *"All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God."* In other words, our new song of praise is a song that anticipates a day when God's salvation plan will have taken place and will impact all people.

The Hebrew people who originally sang this song ultimately were looking forward to the day when God would save His people. The New Testament sees that Savior as Jesus. Today, followers of Jesus can pray this Psalm as we look forward to how God will work in our situations, and most especially, as we look forward to the day when Jesus returns as King of kings and Lord of lords.

In other words, we praise God for what we believe God *will yet do*. **Praising God in the midst of your circumstances predicts God's faithful response.**

It's as if we're saying -- "God, I don't know what or when or how You are planning to work Your plan – in my situation, in my life . . . or in the world . . . but I do know this: You are faithful and You are able. So, I'm praising You in advance of what You will do – because I know it will be good."

Is that a song you're able to sing? Are you able to praise God in advance of the answer to your prayer?

Worship is also a place of battle. So, the front porch is where we determine who – or what – we're going to let inside . . . inside of our homes, inside of our minds, inside of our souls, inside of our characters, inside of our families, inside of our lives.

In fact, talking about God's faithful people, Psalm 149:6 says -- "*May the praise of God be in their mouths and a double-edged sword in their hands . . .*" Now, this Psalm is referring to an actual battle-ready mindset that the people of Israel had to have as they faced their enemies. Praise to God should be coming out of their mouths – because they trusted in God's ultimate faithfulness to His chosen people . . . but along with that praise, they needed to have a sword in their hands – a double-edged sword, extra sharp – in order to fight the necessary battles they faced.

Today, most likely, we don't need to have actual double-edged swords at the ready . . . but we do need to engage in battle – a spiritual battle. And that battle is very real. And the greatest weapon we have is the Word of God. **Hebrews 4:12** calls the Word of God a double-edged sword. Specifically, it says . . .

"For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart."

When we praise God – especially when we praise God using Scripture – God's Word embodied in our praise is the force that stands against the darkest enemy in the battles of life and faith.

Praise is the front porch of worship. Praise is a reminder to us of who God is – and that He alone is worthy of that praise. In **Revelation 4:11**, all of the twenty-four elders – those representing the tribes of Israel as well as the apostles of Jesus – fall down before the throne of God and worship Him, saying . . .

*"You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power."*

Praise is our fitting response to being in the presence of Almighty God.

Look at Psalm 98 again – verses 4 - 9 . . .

*⁴ Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth,
burst into jubilant song with music;
⁵ make music to the Lord with the harp,
with the harp and the sound of singing,
⁶ with trumpets and the blast of the ram's horn—
shout for joy before the Lord, the King.
⁷ Let the sea resound, and everything in it,
the world, and all who live in it.
⁸ Let the rivers clap their hands,
let the mountains sing together for joy;
⁹ let them sing before the Lord,
for he comes to judge the earth.*

"Shout." "Burst into Jubilant song." Use harps, trumpets, horns. In other words, don't be timid in your praise. Lift up your voice. Sing. Shout it out! Let all creation join in with you! And every instrument is fair game. Including – and especially – your voice.

You know, we church people can learn a lot about praise and worship from these words, right?! The Book of Psalms teaches us how to praise.

Let's try praising God using phrases from the Psalms. I'm adapting these phrases from Psalms 8, 18 and 146 . . .

*O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is Your name over all the earth!
You have set your glory in the heavens.
You are my rock, my fortress, my deliverer.
You are my savior, protector, champion and refuge.
Praise the Lord, my soul.
I will praise You, O Lord, all my life;
 I will sing praise to You, my God, as long as I live.
You are the Maker of heaven and earth,
 the sea, and everything in them—
 You remain faithful forever.
You uphold the cause of the oppressed
 and give food to the hungry.
You set prisoners free,
You, O Lord, give sight to the blind,
 and lift up those who are bowed down.
You love the righteous.
You watch over the foreigner
 and sustain the orphan and the widow,
 but You frustrate the ways of the wicked.
You, O Lord, reign forever,
 You are our God for all generations.
Praise the Lord.*

Praise the Lord!

Or, better still . . . sing a hymn or a praise song and lift it up to the Lord as praise for who He is.

So, let's get on the front porch. The messenger has delivered wonderful news. Jesus has brought salvation. Such news is worth shouting from the front porch of your life. Amen.

Let's pray our prayer together . . .

Lord, what do You need me to see, what do You need me to hear,
what do You need me to know, and what do You need me to do?
I am Your servant, in Jesus's name. Amen.