

August 8, 2021
Lectionary 19, Year B
The 11th Sunday after Pentecost
Psalm 34:1-8
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Bless the Lord

Last Sunday, during the sermon, I informed you that for that Sunday, last Sunday, and for the next three weeks, including this Sunday and the two Sundays that follow, our gospel reading would be taken from the sixth chapter of John. After the miracles at the beginning of John 6, the rest of the chapter is known as the “Bread of Life” discourse. In the “Bread of Life” discourse Jesus explains the miracle of the feeding of the 5000. It includes some of the best-known sayings of Jesus like:

I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty(John 6:35).

and

This is indeed the will of my Father, that all who see the Son and believe in him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day (John 6:40).

and

I am the living bread that came down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die...Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh (John 6:51).

In fact, since in the Last Supper account in the gospel of John Jesus washes the feet of his disciples and teaches them and prays for them, but never distributes bread and wine to his disciples, with the words, “Take and eat, this is my body...drink of it, all of you, this is my blood,” a case could be made that chapter 6 of John’s gospel comprises the only justification for Holy Communion found in the gospel of John, the idea that in consuming bread, one comes into the presence of Jesus, takes in the presence of Jesus, communes with Jesus.

So, it’s an important chapter, in a gospel filled with beloved and familiar stories and poetic language.

But I’m not going to talk about it again for a while.

Because what I didn’t tell you last week is that beginning today and for the next three weeks in our lectionary cycle, our assigned Psalm verses for worship comes from the same Psalm, Psalm 34.

I’ve mentioned before that at my former church, I helped to start and run an intergenerational musical group called, *A Joyful Noise*, with a dear friend, Laurie Fay.

We had people in that group at times, who ranged in age from twelve- or thirteen-year-old seventh graders to people in their seventies. We sang a wide variety of music, from arrangements of hymns, to original pieces that Laurie and later her husband, Kevin, wrote, to folk songs, to praise choruses, to choral pieces composed by contemporary Christian composers, to an excerpt from John Rutter’s *Requiem*.

We didn’t sing in worship every week, but we did rehearse every week. And when I say that we rehearsed every week, I really do mean every week.

One of the many things that made *A Joyful Noise* unique, other than our age range and our eclectic musical styles, was that, unlike other choirs I have been a part of in my life, we did not take the summers off. We rehearsed year-round, because that was what the people who were a part of the group wanted to do. In fact, summers tended to be our busiest season, since the other choirs weren't practicing during the summer, so if there was going to be special musical offerings during summer worship at Prince of Peace, it was going to come from *A Joyful Noise*.

And that is how I learned that Psalm 34 is the assigned Psalm for three weeks during the summer every third year, during Year B, when we spend a total of five weeks in the sixth chapter of the gospel of John.

I didn't learn it because I noticed in all of the years that I attended worship in a Lutheran church. I didn't learn it because I was informed about it as a seminary student. I didn't pick it up as I preached year in and year out.

No, I only learned about the frequency of Psalm 34 in the lectionary because one day, early in our days of directing *A Joyful Noise*, Laurie and I were planning ahead for *A Joyful Noise's* rehearsals and musical offerings during the summer we noticed that Psalm 34 was the assigned Psalm for consecutive three weeks. We were pleased to note that we had three very different arrangements of Psalm 34 in our musical library, so during those three weeks in August, when Psalm 34 was assigned and in the weeks leading up to them in rehearsals, *A Joyful Noise* was busy, singing the Psalm.

Maybe its because we just returned to in-person worship, even as we continue to worship together online as well, maybe it's just because I'm me and tend to do this anyway, but I have had worship especially on the brain

in the past few weeks. And maybe that's why, when I look at Psalm 34, especially this time around, I see it as a call to worship.

I see it as a joyful call! Verse 1 says, "I will bless the Lord at all times; the praise of God shall ever be in my mouth" (Psalm 34:1).

Of course, it is not a call for us to limit our praise of God to worship, but I do believe that in worship we can learn how to praise God, so that in the rest of our lives, in the good times, the times when joy and gratitude just bubbles up inside us, and even in the hard times, when it can be difficult to feel the presence of God in our lives and in our circumstances, we are invited to continually praise God.

It is also a reminder that our worship is an offering, that God is worthy of being praised.

We often talk about worship in terms of how it meets our spiritual needs, how it gives us strength for the week ahead, how it gives us a sense of community, early in the pandemic, when things were really locked down, some mental health experts talked about how things like worship, that occurred regularly and predictably, could help us orient ourselves in time, and give a sense of rhythm to our lives, when we might have felt like we were cast adrift as all other activities stopped. We often look for worship to fit into our lives and our schedule and our preferences, hoping that worship will shape itself around our lives.

But, of course, we know that that is not what worship is, or at least, certainly not all that worship is.

I often, when I am talking to unbelieving friends, talk about how our church is useful in terms of the expectations and needs of the world. I talk about a hundred quilts made for Lutheran World Relief, I talk about school

kits and health kits for people in need. I talk about our partnership with the food pantry, I talk about fellowship groups for children and adults, how the church offers people a community to journey through life with in a world that can be heartbreakingly isolating. I talk about how our church building is used for service and celebration for people in our wider community. And all of those things are true. And all of those things are important, perhaps vital to the living out of our communal faith.

But I sometimes, when I'm talking with friends who aren't followers of any religion, I downplay the worship part of our life together. Because I know that it will sound weird to them. The idea that central to our life together is time set aside for singing the praises of, hearing the words of, experiencing the presence of, giving offerings to, praying to, a God they do not believe in. I'm worried that they might not understand why worship is so important to us, why it could be considered to be the most important thing that we do together, why every other part of our life together, is supposed to flow from what we experience in worship together, that every part of our whole lives as a community and separately, are supposed to be shaped by what we experience in worship, from confession and forgiveness, to singing God's praises, to living generously, to being guided by an informed understanding of scripture, to recognizing God's presence with us, not just in worship, but in every aspect of our daily lives.

There are certainly some Christians who believe that one can live a full Christian life as an individual. I've even known Christians who believe that Christian community can distract one from a faithful following of God.

I have a whole lot of arguments against that one, but for today, all I'll say is that verse three of Psalm 34 invites, and calls us to communal worship. It says this:

Proclaim with me the greatness of the Lord;
let us exalt God's name together (Psalm 34:3).

I've said it before, I'll probably say it again, but one of the things that got me through this pandemic and still gets me through today, is our worship together. In those earliest days, when we first went Zoom, when I didn't know what I was doing, it brought such comfort and joy to my soul to see your names and faces popping onto my screen, seeing and knowing that we would, in fact be able to worship the Lord together, to sing God's praises together, to exalt God's name together, even in a time of trouble, to be able to proclaim the greatness of the Lord together. We are not supposed to do this alone. And thanks be to God that we have not had to. God has been with us and we have been with each other.

This Psalm calls us to praise God, but sometimes it doesn't feel easy to do that. Sometimes it's hard for us to experience, to feel God's presence in our life.

The Psalmist knows that times like that come into every life. They came like that into his life. He knows that life is often difficult and that God does not always feel close.

But still, his testimony is that in those difficult times, in those trying times, in those times when God felt far away, God was still with him. This is what he said, "I called in my affliction, and the Lord heard me" (Psalm 34:6a)

In this Psalm we are reminded that worship and praise are not just for people who are joyful, who are happy and at peace with the world and with God.

Worship and praise and prayer are also gifts to people who are struggling and suffering. In this Psalm we are invited to bring, not just our joys, but also our worries, our sorrows, and our pain to God. There is space in worship for those things too, for us to call upon God in our affliction, and to rest in the trust that God hears us and will answer.

One question that I often ask when I'm looking at the readings for a Sunday is "Why?" The way that the lectionary works is that on most Sundays, the Old Testament reading and the Psalm are supposed to go with the gospel reading. The second reading, is usually doing its own thing, often taking us through a whole epistle, a letter, from Paul or one of the other New Testament letter writers.

So, when I look at the Old Testament and Psalm readings, I ask "Why were these readings paired with this gospel reading?" Sometimes the answer is obvious, sometimes its less so.

For today, it's pretty obvious why we have, as our Old Testament reading the story of Elijah eating and drinking food that was miraculously provided for him by the angel of the Lord on a Sunday when our gospel reading is about Jesus telling us that he is the Bread of Life.

But as for our Psalm, here is the one verse that helps me to understand why this Psalm was paired with today's gospel reading:

Taste and see that the Lord is good;

happy are they who take refuge in God! (Psalm 34:8)

For those who are able to be at worship in person, we are invited, in the holy communion meal, to feast on Christ's very presence, who has said that whoever comes to him will never be hungry, and whoever believes in him will never be thirsty (John 6:35) and who has said, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die...Whoever eats of this bread will live forever..." (John 6:51).

And for all of use, we feast, not just on Jesus the bread, but also on Jesus who comes to us as the word made flesh, and who feeds us with his word.

We take refuge in the Lord who comes us in word and sacrament, who comes to us in the fellowship we share, who comes to us as we worship, as we bless the Lord, and who blesses us. Thanks be to God! Amen.