

“Celebrating God’s Presence in the Extra/Ordinary”  
Sermon by Oby Ballinger  
Part of the “Blessings” Worship Series  
Edina Morningside Community Church; July 30, 2017

**Psalm 148**

*Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights!  
Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his host!  
Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars!  
Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens!  
Let them praise the name of the Lord, for he commanded and they were created.  
He established them forever and ever; he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.  
Praise the Lord from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps,  
fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command!  
Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars!  
Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds!  
Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth!  
Young men and women alike, old and young together!  
Let them praise the name of the Lord, for his name alone is exalted; his glory is above earth and heaven.  
He has raised up a horn for his people, praise for all his faithful, for the people of Israel who are close to him. Praise the Lord!*

**Luke 12:27**

*Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.*

The famous UCC theologian Reinhold Niebuhr used to say that pastors should preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. So I’ve brought both today: a Bible from my bookshelf, and today’s Star Tribune. This week, the newspaper is thicker than the Good Book! It might be that I chose a travel-size Bible, and this is a Sunday edition, but it’s also the case that the news this week has continued its overflowing pace.

Where to start? In the paper today are articles about the state of politics in America, the failed repeal of the Affordable Care Act and its implications for bipartisanship, the president’s new (and profane) communications director, a general coming in as White House chief of staff, another missile launch from North Korea, and sanctions against Russia for election meddling. As an NPR headline said yesterday, [“Don’t look away: stuff happens fast in Trump’s first summer in Washington”](#).

It feels impossible to look away—we seem to live hour by hour preparing for the latest development until it’s eclipsed by the next one. There is so much to take in, learn, and ponder. At stake for the country right now is economic prosperity, social progress, our standing in the world, our national identity, and even democracy itself. (So just a few small things.) Every minute, hour and day there are dozens more articles to read and consider. I find myself checking out one link after another online, trying to determine which headlines are clickbait and which ones will open a new angle of insight on the world. Being a news consumer these days is like being a dog at a whistler’s convention. There’s always something else to get our attention.

The news has seldom seemed more urgent, but current events are only one way to read the world. Niebuhr said what he did about the Bible and the newspaper to make sure they were considered in equal measure. So let us not ignore the Bible’s wisdom from centuries ago, for now and for all of time. The psalmist today gently pulls our gaze beyond the matters of daily concern and toward something more

eternal. “Praise God!” we read. Verse after verse of Psalm 148 describes how all of creation praises its Creator. Praise God from the heavens and waters of the deep. Praise God, sun, moon, and shining stars. Praise God from the earth—fire, hail, snow, frost, and stormy winds! Every magnificent and impressive facet of creation praises God. This is not a one-time chorus either; the psalmist hears the entire cosmos engaged in unceasing adoration.

If the acclaim of heaven seems too grand, our poet gets more down-to-earth as well. “Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds!” In a similar fashion, Jesus tells his disciples to consider—not the heavens overhead nor the animals underfoot—but lilies like those in our gardens this summer. They *too* proclaim the beauty of God in the world. By simply existing, they preach of God’s providential care, who brings them to life from soil, clothes them with extraordinary color, and sustains their existence on the earth. “Let them praise the name of the Lord,” the Psalmist would say, “for [God] commanded and they were created.”

Going through the world as though everything were offering its own heavenly praise opens our eyes in a different way than the newspaper does. God would call us from a jumpy reaction to every latest tweet, and instead lead us beside still spiritual waters with a reminder of who remains sovereign of heaven and earth. What if we paused to consider how many things and beings during the day are *right*, just as they are? This doesn’t require hiding one’s head—ostrich-like—in the sand. In fact, it helps the church return to being a countercultural community which offers something different from the status quo, a way to heal much of what consumes our attention these days. It stems from practicing gratitude throughout the day.

Celtic spirituality shows us one way to do this, with its custom of “blessing prayers”. Those who practice it approach everyday things by calling for God’s blessing through that object or creature. Imagine if we went through our days this way. Bless to me my cell phone, and the ways I am connected through it. Bless to me my cereal bowl, and the ways it holds the food I need to start the day. Bless to me my car keys, the car that they bring to life, the vehicles I travel with today, and the road itself. Bless to me my dog Ruthie, for her endless energy and single-mindedness at feeding time. Bless to me this, and that, and this, and that.... This habit of the heart invites us to recognize blessings and divine care all around us. It calls us to join the universal chorus of praise, and to celebrate God’s presence in the extra-ordinary.

Psychologists have long known that what we perceive on a regular basis starts to become our reality. If the world is always just a hair’s-breadth away from ultimate catastrophe, we will live on pins and needles, finding no rest. Yet if we focus a bit more on the blessings around us we begin to hear creation’s praise to God, and it might lead us to hold the headlines with a similar generosity.

Today the Scripture calls us as the church to create a different reality by letting our spirits practice gentle gratitude instead of fear. We *are* blessed in every moment of every day. God invites you and me to notice that, to encourage that—not to ignore what is real and perilous but to supplement it with a reminder that the God of blessings still holds the whole of creation. The church hears God’s call to be in the world but not defined by the world—acting as agents of hope and healing to counteract the flood of alarming news. We are sent as Clara Barton went into Civil War battlefields, an unlikely, uncommon presence organizing aid to build up and heal. God conscripts us today into this ministry of healing, to show and proclaim that the world is for blessing and not for cursing. In so doing, our testimony can help calm the anxious fears of this nation and seek wiser guidance for the way forward.

Because as long as we live we will always have the news, and we will always have the Bible. So bless to me this news, *and* bless to me this Bible. May the God who speaks through them both keep at bay heartsickness in the former with the faithful imagination of the latter. Amen.