

Sermon: Exclaiming!!
Scripture: PSalm 148
Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans
Date: December 29, 2024

Happy 5th day of Christmas to you! In the traditional 12 days of Christmas song it was this day that there is something of a pause in the song as my true love gives to me - 5 golden rings! 4 calling birds, three french hens, two turtle doves and... a partridge in a pear tree. So while I don't have 5 golden rings for you, I offer 5 golden nuggets of wisdom that comes to us related to our scripture this morning. And the first nugget is about the gold of punctuation.

My mother was a Latin teacher during my growing up and her mother was a teacher and so grammar was important to her. Whether we were going to lie down or lay something down was not to be trifled with - or was something with which not to trifle. And Paul Simon should have talked to Ellen Burhans because it's not "me and julio down by the schoolyard" but "Julio and I down by the school yard"! And punctuation was important to my mother as well. She still has a magnet that sits on her fridge we gave her with three lines - "let's eat, Grandma! Let's eat Grandma! Punctuation saves lives."

Most of us are over 50 in this room so I'm pretty sure that most have not come to the proper and appropriate use of punctuation marks in order to relate to generations younger than us. Because our daughters are in their 20's Tracy and I have become better about exclamation marks and periods in texts. So for instance did you know a period isn't just a period anymore, especially in texts. A period now tends to mean you are mad, even exasperated if not aggressively so. So be wary of putting periods at

the end of your text with a GenZ or GenY on the other end, unless your pretty mad about what you are writing. Better to leave a sentence dangling there with no period at all!

And exclamation marks are always fine and appropriate to use even if you're not particularly excited. What exclamation marks mean is that you're not mad. I'm not making this up. So, for instance in my work, relating to Maeve for instance over text is a different thing punctuation-wise than relating to Jane or Maggie. I have myself that when Jane says "ok" "period". She is not angry at me and when Maeve puts an exclamation at the end of her text she's not particularly thrilled. She's just not mad. You've got to put at least 3 maybe 4 punctuation marks with an excited emoji or two to really know whether someone found what you said funny or is excited about it.

So there you go! That's the first of 5 golden rings of wisdom for you this morning - punctuation saves lives. But the reason I bring up punctuation at all is because of the Psalm we are given this morning where depending on the translation exclamation marks abound. The writer of Psalm 148 is clearly excited but in the original text of the Hebrew there were no punctuation marks at all, so translators had to and have to decide where one sentence ends and another one begins and where question marks land and exclamation marks, to say nothing of commas and semicolons.

The writer and Disciples of Christ minister, Lee Hull Moses, from Greensboro, NC explores this in her reflection on Psalm 148 where she notes that it depends dramatically on what translation you read as to how many exclamation marks are used. In the one we had for this morning which is the NRSV translation of the Bible here are there are - how many? - 7 exclamation points. The American Standard Bible only has 6 exclamation

points. The New International Version and the King James version have zero which Lee Moses suggests for King James is likely due to “it being too regal for such frivolity while the New King James version lightens up a bit and adds 6”. The translation known as the Common English Bible has a whopping 18 exclamation marks - likely making it much more understandable to younger generations - ok now, this writer is excited!¹

It's a Psalm of praise as are the last 5 psalms of the psalter. Praising is understood in many Christian catechisms as the central purpose and activity of what we as human beings are meant for and Christmas reminds us that when we do so we also join in with the angels in our praise and with all creation. Praising God in the highest! And praise necessary involves exclamation marks because you can't praise without it being an excited and energized thing. This is not praise somehow - “that was good.” This is praise - “oh, wow, that is SO good! Oh my gosh!” Right? The emotion welling up and pouring out almost like you can't help it. That's what praise looks and sounds like.

So the 2nd golden ring nugget is how praise works for us as humans. CS Lewis says:

“I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise does not merely express the enjoyment but completes it; it is its appointed consummation. It is not out of compliment that lovers keep on telling one another how beautiful they are; the delight is incomplete till it is expressed. It is frustrating to have discovered a new author and not to be able to tell anyone how good he is; to come suddenly, at the turn of the road, upon some mountain valley of unexpected grandeur and then to have to keep silent because the people with you care for it no more than for a tin can in the ditch; to hear a good joke and find no one to share it with. . . . The Scotch catechism says that man's chief end is 'to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.' But we shall then know that these are the same

¹ Lee Hull Moses in “Exclaiming Praise” in Christian Century's Sunday's Coming Blog.

thing. Fully to enjoy is to glorify. In commanding us to glorify Him, God is inviting us to enjoy Him.”

The purpose of praise is to consummate the joy and appreciation we have for another. Our enjoyment is not complete until the praise is rendered. And maybe that's words given but maybe it's just a pause of bliss or a breath of awe, a saying “wow!” That expresses our praise. Praise completes our joy.

The 3rd golden ring nugget of wisdom that comes from this Psalm is in how the Psalmist speaks of all creation praising God, that in our praising of God, we do not do it in a vacuum but we praise along with the things of heaven and with the things of the earth. The Psalmist has all the heavens praising God and then all the earth doing the same and then humans joining in on the act. Praising is done in community, not alone, nor are we ever alone, but our lives are an intricate network of connectedness which is why the heavens and the earth is often what elicits our praise because they themselves are praising God. Therefore the act of praise is fundamentally relational. It's why it's always a part of our worship of God. The gloria patri is an expression of praise - “Glory be to the father and the son and to the holy ghost”. And we tend not to sing the Doxology much anymore but we will today after the offering and it's based on this Psalm - “Praise God from whom all blessings flow, praise God all creatures here below, praise God above ye heavenly hosts, praise Father son and holy ghost...”

So, praise requires multiple exclamation marks, praise completes the experience of joy and praise is inherently relational.

The fourth golden ring of wisdom is that praise is necessary because it turns us away from ourselves and directs us towards the other, in particular towards God. Praise reminds us that we are not due any of this

but it all comes as gift, freely given, as grace from God, praise God! Our sin tendency as human beings is to forget how contingent we are upon everything around us and especially upon the unseen spirit of our creator Godself. If we are not careful and intentional we naturally begin to turn in on ourselves and believe ourselves to be Lord over our lives when in fact God is Lord of our lives. We can at times get lost in the pursuit of praise for ourselves when God is the appropriate direction for our praise. We become curved in on ourselves with pride, greed, resentment but praise turns us back outward toward God. Truly, praise is what saves lives. The need to praise and praise itself as the Psalmist explains are built into the structure of the world. It's not a good idea of something we should do, it is built into the very fabric of existence. Praise directs us out from ourselves towards God and others...

Which brings us to the 5th golden ring nugget of wisdom here for us today and that is how the created world being created within this structure where praise is part and parcel of it all can also teach us how to praise. This is how the writer Frederick Buechner speaks of it -

The whole of creation is in on the act; the sun and moon, the sea, fire and snow, Holstein cows and white-throated sparrows, old men in walkers and children who still haven't taken their first step. Their praise is not chiefly a matter of saying anything, because most of creation doesn't deal in words. Instead, the snow whirls, the fire roars, the Holstein bellows, the old man watches the moon rise. Their praise is not something that at their most complimentary they say, but something that at their truest they are. We learn to praise God not by paying compliments, but by paying attention. Watch how the trees exult when the wind is in them. Mark the utter stillness of the great blue heron in the swamp. Listen to the sound of the rain. Learn how to say "Hallelujah" from the ones who say it right.

Praise requires exclamation marks, praise completes the experience of joy, praise is inherently relational, and praise is something that all creation does and we along with it. Praise saves lives. So praise God from whom all blessings flow, exclamation mark, exclamation mark!!