

Declaring God's Praise
Rev. Dr. David J. Fekete
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Isaiah 43:16-21

John 12:1-8

Psalm 126

Bible Readings:

Isaiah 43:16-21 ¹⁶ Thus says the LORD,
who makes a way in the sea,
a path in the mighty waters,
¹⁷ who brings forth chariot and horse,
army and warrior;
they lie down, they cannot rise,
they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:
¹⁸ "Remember not the former things,
nor consider the things of old.
¹⁹ Behold, I am doing a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.
²⁰ The wild beasts will honor me,
the jackals and the ostriches;
for I give water in the wilderness,
rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people,
²¹ the people whom I formed for myself
that they might declare my praise.

John 12:1-8: Six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Laz'arus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. ² There they made him a supper; Martha served, and Laz'arus was one of those at table with him. ³ Mary took a pound of costly ointment of pure nard and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped his feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the ointment. ⁴ But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (he who was to betray him), said, ⁵ "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" ⁶ This he said, not that he cared for the poor but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box he used to take what was put into it. ⁷ Jesus said, "Let her alone, let her keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸ The poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me."

Psalm 126: When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.
² Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then they said among the nations,
"The LORD has done great things for them."
³ The LORD has done great things for us;
we are glad.
⁴ Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like the watercourses in the Negeb!
⁵ May those who sow in tears

reap with shouts of joy!
6 He that goes forth weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
bringing his sheaves with him.

Declaring God's Praise

How do we praise God? When do we praise God? How do we strengthen our relationship with God? These are some of the questions our Bible readings bring up.

Our reading from Isaiah tells us that God formed us for Himself so that we can declare God's praise. It is certainly good to praise God. God has done wonders—wonders we see more and more every moment of every day, the more we grow on our spiritual journey. God has done wonders to and for us. God gave us life. God continually gives us the gift of life. For without God's sustaining power, our bodies would fall down lifeless in an instant. God lifts us ever upward into heaven's glories. God is continually drawing us out of a lower state into a higher state. That is why one of our benedictions is, "The Lord keep our going out and our coming in from this time forth and even for ever more." Our going out and our coming in means going out of a lesser spiritual state into a higher one. And God has created a marvelous natural world. The beauties of a flower, the grandeur of a tree, the glory of the sky and stars, the intricacy of the ecological cycle all testify to an all-knowing, all giving Creator. For all this and much, much more we can and should praise God.

It needs to be said that God doesn't need our praise. When we think of humans who expect to be praised for their good deeds, we don't think highly of them. Certainly He who is all powerful, yet came to humanity as a humble human baby does not have the vanity to expect us to praise Him.

But it does us good to show our gratitude and love for God. A wise friend of mine was talking with me about prayer once. He said that one of the things prayer does for us is to remind us that there is something greater than ourselves. Prayer reminds us that we don't know it all. Prayer reminds us that our decisions, even our best decisions, are all relative to divine wisdom. Prayer, in a word, gives us humility. This humility is what praising God gives us. Praising God means that we don't take the credit for the deeds we do. Praising God means that we aren't the centre of the universe. Praising God means that we become aware that an all loving Creator formed us and the world around us, not we and human ingenuity.

In our story from John, we find Mary showing her love and gratitude to Jesus. Mary shows her love for Jesus by anointing Him with expensive oil. We don't have Jesus here with us in person to do good things to. So the questions arise, "How do we show our love for God? How do we praise God?"

The words of Judas give us a somewhat surprising direction to ponder. Judas criticizes Mary for spending her money on expensive oil with which to anoint Jesus. Judas says that Mary should have sold the oil and given the money to the poor. Some of us may be somewhat surprised by Jesus' words. Jesus says the rather pessimistic words, "The poor you will always have with you, but you do not always have me" (John 12:8).

These words may sound surprising because in other places in the Gospels, Jesus says that we show our love for God by giving clothes to the naked, by feeding the hungry, and by visiting prisoners. The general impression that we get from the Gospels is that we should help those less fortunate than ourselves. So it might sound surprising to hear Jesus tell Mary she did a good thing by anointing Him

with expensive oil instead of giving money to the poor.

But this passage suggests that there are other ways to show our love for God than through social issues like feeding the poor, clothing the naked, and visiting prisoners and the sick. Loving God means developing a relationship with God. I think that our readings teach us that sometimes we need to take time to meditate on our relationship with God. Although I have said on many occasions that we love God and the neighbor by service to society in work and our personal relations, now I am saying that loving God requires more.

I think we do well to take time out of our affairs in the world. I think we need time to meditate and commune with God in some way. I have at times said we need not become monks and nuns and renounce the world entirely. But I would commend a time like renouncing the world. I think our society is too busy, values being busy too much. The poet Wordsworth wrote, “The world is too much with us, getting and spending.” It can sometimes be that work and business and shopping and consumer goods occupy too much of our time. We can be over stimulated by all the media our world gives us. The poet T. S. Eliot called this, “Distracted from distraction by distraction.” We fill our minds with our work, then fill our minds with the news on our ride home or half listen to music, then get home and put on the TV. Distracted from distraction by distraction. Eliot talks about a moment in a subway train when the train stops too long between stations. This fills the commuters with terror because there is nothing to occupy their minds, to placate their minds,

Or as, when an underground train, in the tube, stops too long between stations
And the conversation rises and slowly fades into silence
And you see behind every face the mental emptiness deepen
Leaving only the growing terror of nothing to think about;

Rather than being distracted from distraction by distraction, or the terror of nothing to think about, or the world being too much with us, there is another option that I think our readings commend. By praising God, we praise what is godly in our world. There are our beloved relations: spouse, friend, children. We can interrupt our over-stimulated lives by paying attention to those people in our lives that matter. We can show them that they matter. This is the example of Mary. In our story, Martha served while Mary anointed Jesus with perfume. Martha was busy, Mary showed her love for Jesus. In another story, Mary sits at Jesus’ feet while Martha bustles around and serves everyone. In that story, Martha complains to Jesus that Mary is just sitting there while she is doing all the work. Jesus, though, says that Mary has chosen the better path.

And as we take time from our worldly distractions to show our love for those dear to us, so, too, we need to take time out from the world to commune with God. We need to quite our radios, our TV’s our computer games, our newspapers and listen and talk with God. Eliot, drawing on the tradition of Christian mystics writes of a spiritual darkness. This darkness is when we still the mind, let go of the senses, and sink into the darkness which purifies the soul. He speaks of,

darkness to purify the soul
Emptying the sensual with deprivation
Cleansing affection from the temporal.

Emptying the sensual means closing off what comes to us from our five senses—sights, hearing, touch, taste, smell. It means turning off the TV, the radio, the computer, the snacks, and being quiet with the soul. For all those things, when we have too much of them drown out the voice of spirit. “Not here the darkness, in this twittering world.” I think it’s kind of funny that in this line from Eliot we find the word, “twitter.”

Well if I continue in this vein I'm going to sound like a world-renouncer myself, which I am not and do not aspire to be. I think what I am saying in this talk is that we do well to quiet the twitter for a time. We need to enter the darkness and leave off being distracted from distraction by distraction. We need to treasure our dear relations. And we need to treasure God, in whatever form that takes.

PRAYER

Lord, your wonders are beyond number. You have created a vast universe which you govern - from galaxies to atoms. And you have created animals of all kinds - from great bison and elephants to butterflies and tiny ants. And you have created humanity. You have created us to marvel at the wonders of your creation and to praise you for your wonderful works. And you care for every living thing. You care for each animal and every single person. The Bible tells us that even the hairs on our head are numbered. You continually flow into us with your life-giving love. And you continually flow into us with your saving grace, lifting us ever upward into heaven's bliss. For this, and for so much more, we praise you and give thanks to you.

And Lord, we pray for the sick. May they experience the power of your healing love. Fill them with the grace of your healing power. Comfort their family and friends. We pray for the grace of your healing power for all who are ailing in body or soul.