

Let them all praise the name of the Lord!

Psalm 148

April 28, 2013

Praise the Lord!

*Praise the Lord from heaven,
you that live in the heights above.
Praise him, all his angels,
all his heavenly armies.*

*Praise him, sun and moon;
praise him, shining stars.
Praise him, highest heavens,
and the waters above the sky.*

Let them all praise the name of the Lord!

Let them all praise the name of the Lord! All of them! All those in heaven and all those on earth.

Psalm 148 is written in two parallel halves, both ending with the phrase: "Let them all praise the name of the Lord!" The first half begins: "Praise the Lord from heaven," and the second half begins: "Praise the Lord from the earth." The point of the psalm is that all of them offer praise to the Lord, all on heaven and all on earth, not one or the other, but both. Everything, all of creation, joins in praise of the creator.

So who is praising the Lord from heaven? Who lives the heights above? Angels, God's heavenly armies, sun, moon, stars, and the waters above the sky.

Notice that angels and sun and moon and stars are all grouped together, all parts of one heavenly choir offering its praise to the Lord. Why? Why does the poet group them together? Why make no clear distinction between spiritual beings and natural objects?

In part, I think, it is because of a naive or primitive cosmology. All these things are thought of as "up there," in the sky, denizens of the heavens. But, more importantly, they are grouped together because biblical faith does not make a clear distinction between the spiritual realm and the natural realm, between the space we occupy and the space God occupies.

There are certainly other ways of thought and other religious traditions that do. For them the way of wisdom, the spiritual journey, is a quest for a better place, another realm, a universe not subject to the limitations and imperfections of nature. For them, this world, this universe, nature, is but a shadow, a shadow of the real thing, a flawed representation of the idea, the ideal, the pure reality, entirely free from material limitations. And any god worth his or her or its godness is not going to let himself or herself or itself be tainted by too close contact with this messy, dirty, stuff-filled world!

But our God does! Our God comes to us! This is it! This is the real thing, not just a shadow. And this is where God is praised: not in the heavens, but from the heavens. And this is who offers holy praise to the Lord: not just angels, but angels and sun and stars; the Lord's divine messengers, yes, but also hot balls of hydrogen and helium, spewing out heat and light.

But how? How do sun and moon and stars offer God praise? Simply by being! The sun by being sun. The moon by being moon. The stars by being stars.

Their very being is praise, because they all and each reflect by their very nature, by being what they are, something of God's power and God's beauty and God's wisdom and God's grace. We look at them and we see, not just stuff, but the indelible imprint of a wondrous God. And the more we see them and study them, the more we uncover the deep mysteries of this universe, the more they offer praise to the Lord who made them.

Praise the Lord!

*Praise the Lord from the earth,
sea monsters and all ocean depths;
lightning and hail, snow and clouds,
strong winds that obey his command.*

*Praise him, hills and mountains,
fruit trees and forests;
all animals, tame and wild,
reptiles and birds.*

*Praise him, kings and all peoples,
princes and all other rulers;
young women and young men,
old people and children too.*

Let them all praise the name of the Lord!

Praise the Lord from the earth. It is not just the heavens that are telling the glory of God! The earth offers its own praise, this earth.

Sea monsters and all the mysterious inhabitants of the ocean depths.

Lightning and hail, snow and clouds, and wind, winds that blow over plain and mountain, desert and ocean, winds that bring a change in the weather, winds that spread pollen and drive sailboats, winds that reshape mountains.

Mountains and hills, fruit trees and forests, wild animals and domesticated animals, cows and sheep and goats and horses, reptiles and birds, owls and egrets and warblers and puffins and hawks.

And people. Big people and little people. Leader people and follower people. Old people and young people. Women people and men people. Just people.

Sun and moon and stars are grouped with the angels, and people are grouped with? Sea monsters and fruit trees and alligators! We are of the earth, not of heaven. We are dust -- rather attractive dust, maybe! -- but dust. We are creatures, made of the stuff of this earth, part of the stuff of this earth, and, along with the rest of the earth, and along with all of creation, we offer the Lord our praise.

How? How do we offer God praise? How did the sun do it? How do hail and wind and mountain and redwood and cougar and salmon and caribou do it? Simply by being. They do it simply by being what they are, and we do it simply by being what we are.

But we are different too. We, of all creatures, can choose not to be what we are. This is our freedom. This is our power. This is our special glory -- and our curse -- that we can choose not to be what we are, that we can choose to deny and betray our humanity.

We are made to reflect God. We are made to reflect God by being like God: by our good stewardship and compassionate care for all that depends on us and is affected by our actions; by our love for strong and weak, friend and foe, alike; by our patience and tenderness and mercy; by our generosity, by our love of the truth, by our love of peace.

When we do that, when we act like creatures made in God's image, when we are what we are, God is praised. But when we do not, when we choose to deny our humanity, when we choose to deny God ... God is praised anyway!

Because we are what we are! We bear in our bodies and on our spirits the indelible imprint of a wondrous God. God is praised, God will be praised, by us and by all of creation! Let them all praise the name of the Lord!

Praise the Lord!

*His name is greater than all others;
his glory is above earth and heaven.*

*He made us strong,
so that we may praise him --
we, his people, so dear to him.*

Let them all praise the name of the Lord!

Praise the Lord from heaven. Praise the Lord from the earth. Let them all praise the name of the Lord! Because his name is greater than all the others and his glory is above earth and heaven.

God is praised in and from all creation, but God is not contained in creation. God's glory is revealed in sun and stars and mountain and wind and apple tree and wild goat and you, but God's glory is so much more than any of this, so far above any of this, above earth and heaven.

And yet, and yet this One, this God, who is beyond and above everything chooses us. God strengthens us and loves us. God makes us his people. We are dear to him. And so we praise him, as we are, but also as we will, with our bodies, with our spirits, and with our voices ...