

Dear Friends in Christ, Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

We've been invited to a party. A praise party. A "praise God" party. We're missing the party hats and balloons but there are all kinds of musical instruments involved: trumpet, lute, harp, tambourine, strings, pipe and cymbals—loud clashing cymbals. At the end of 149 psalms, we are invited to praise God. The word praise is used 13 times in these six verses. So we have been invited to a praise God party today.

The word praise means in its most basic form to state a price or value, like in appraise the value of something. It goes on to mean to commend, to glory, to laud, to worship, to see of value.

In Psalm 150 we are told not only to praise God but where to praise God. We are told where the party is: first of all the sanctuary. This would be the Temple, the holy place of God, churches like ours today, the gatherings of God's people, the obvious holy times and today!

But we are to praise God not only in the sanctuary but also here, in the firmament. Technically, firmament is the dome surrounding the earth, but it means the rest of God's creation, God's world. So we are to glorify, value, worship God not only in the holy places, but also in the rest of the world. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said of the church, "The church is only the church when it seeks to serve the world." So we praise God both in God's sanctuary but also where we meet the rest of the world. We are to take our praise of God into daily life.

BUT—wait a minute, you say! This talk of a praise party is all fine and good: praise and happiness to God again and again with music and whatever. But it's not life as most people know it! You're right.

Psalm 150 comes only at the end of 149 other psalms. Psalms that are full of the stuff of daily life as we know it. Psalm 30 from last week tells of a person nearly dying from sickness and the person is afraid their enemies will gloat when they die. They beg not to be useless to God in death. Psalm 22 speaks of feeling deserted by God, left alone to cry night and day with little hope. Psalm 137 cries out how hard it is to sing or maybe praise God in a foreign land or situation. Psalm 34 tells of a person who cried out to God and God helped them, offering a testimony to God's help. Psalm 23 speaks of the comfort that comes from knowing that God doesn't desert us, but is like a shepherd to us. Psalm 130 speaks of crying out from the depths of sin and hopelessness, believing that God will offer forgiveness.

If you read through the psalms and I urge you to do so, you will find that these psalms talk about daily life, our life and our realities. You will find all of life in them.

Then, and only then, after we have realized what these psalms are saying, can we attend the praise party. We come not in denial of life and its messiness. But from the acceptance that through all the parts of life, God is present. God hears, listens, walks alongside us and is ever present to us. Much like the poem "Footsteps" speaks of.

We come to praise God, not because all is hunky-dory, but rather because God is the God of mighty deeds and surpassing greatness.

What do these mean? Mighty deeds are the deliverance at the Red Sea, the recovery from severe illness, the times we called to God and God answered. The times when our guilt was so great and God forgave us. Mighty deeds are those we recognize rather easily.

The surpassing greatness of God is a little harder to see. It involves God's nature, God's "being". Some people only want mighty deeds from God and check in when they are in deep trouble. They miss the surpassing greatness of God that we come to understand over the long haul of life. St. Augustine said, "Our hearts are made for thee, O Lord, and they shall not rest until they rest in thee." The surpassing greatness of God is similar to when we find that special person in our life and we say, "Ahhh, this feels so right, so natural." When we find that God, being with God, living with God, through the ups and downs of life brings a peace that passes all understanding, there is a sense of "Ahhh, this feels so right, so natural."

I will share two examples that come from songs that were sung here in the last couple weeks. The first is "When Peace Like a River" written by Horatio Spafford, an American lawyer and businessman. He sent his wife and four children on ahead of him to Europe on a steamship. It collided with another ship and only his wife survived. As the ship he was on came over the spot of the sinking, the captain informed him of where he was. These words came to him despite the awful pain and hurt: "When peace like a river attendeth my way; when sorrows like sea billows roll; whatever my lot, thou has taught me to say, it is well, it is well with my soul. Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come, let this bless assurance control, that Christ hast regarded my helpless estate and hath shed his own blood for my soul."

The second is "Now Thank We All Our God" written by Martin Rinkart, a Lutheran pastor living during the 30 Years War of 1618-1648 in Europe with both the plague and armies ransacking his city. He was burying 50 people a day and eventually even his wife. Yet, he wrote, "Now thank we all our God, with hearts and hands and voices. Who wondrous things has done, in whom his world rejoices. Who from our mothers arm, has blest us on our way, with countless gifts of love and still is ours today."

There are the dark nights of the soul, we know them, but God's surpassing greatness is that we are not alone, a light still shines in these times.

Someone asked a question this past Thursday at Men's Fellowship, "Do we need music to praise God?" Think about Jesus' words in Matthew 28:20, "and lo, I am with you always, to the end of the age." Jesus says we can take the "being" of God into the firmament, the rest of the world, not with music always—and maybe not with music much at all. But we praise God by being God's ambassadors in the world. In Genesis 1, God says, "Let us make man after our image and let him have dominion over the earth." God made us to represent God in this world. God made us to be God's presence on this earth. As we carry out that responsibility, we praise God because we are honoring God in how we live.

So we praise God and stand as God's ambassadors when we: Help mom and dad; take education seriously; stand up for the weak; stand up against bullies; take time to listen and understand others, to come alongside of them and try to walk in their shoes; to refuse to laugh at jokes and comments that are inappropriate, that mock, put down, hurt others; when we take a stand for what is right even though it is costly to us. As we seek to follow our Lord Jesus, we praise God—without music, but so powerfully.

We honor, laud, glorify, praise God as we represent God in this place and in the rest of the world.

We have been invited to praise party. We might use music, lots of it. We might use no music. But as we live for God and what God wants for us and the world—we praise God. Praising God is living for God. Amen