

Wonderful Deeds
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First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
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Psalm 111

- ¹ Praise the LORD!
I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart,
in the company of the upright, in the congregation.
- ² Great are the works of the LORD,
studied by all who delight in them.
- ³ Full of honor and majesty is his work,
and his righteousness endures forever.
- ⁴ He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds;
the LORD is gracious and merciful.
- ⁵ He provides food for those who fear him;
he is ever mindful of his covenant.
- ⁶ He has shown his people the power of his works,
in giving them the heritage of the nations.
- ⁷ The works of his hands are faithful and just;
all his precepts are trustworthy.
- ⁸ They are established forever and ever,
to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.
- ⁹ He sent redemption to his people;
he has commanded his covenant forever.
Holy and awesome is his name.
- ¹⁰ The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;
all those who practice it have a good understanding.
His praise endures forever.

Mark 1:21-28

²¹They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. ²²They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. ²³Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, ²⁴and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." ²⁵But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" ²⁶And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. ²⁷They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." ²⁸At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

"Praise the Lord! I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation." This could have been written for any Sunday morning service or, in this case, Friday night. Thanks be to God for the good in my life, in our life together. But this was written in a very different circumstance than we might expect. "Many scholars believe that the fifth book of Psalms (which includes Psalms 107 through 150) is a reflection of the experiences of the Jewish people in their

long exile in Babylon and their joy at the prospective return,”¹ says theologian Thomas Parker. Their experiences **in exile**, not their experiences upon returning from exile or before exile but their experiences in exile. “Praise the Lord! I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart.”

The psalmist reflected the thoughts of a people anticipating the future, of a people remembering God’s goodness in the past as a predictor of the future. They are certain that God has been with them and will continue to be. And not only has God been with them but God has done great things, so many that eight of the ten verses list why God is to be praised. **God** has gained renown by his wonderful deeds. Not the gathered group, the congregation, but **God** is the one who has gained renown. When we have a successful project or welcome strangers in a way we know they feel welcomed, we like to think about what we have done right, how we have followed God’s commands well, how we have used our God-given gifts well. In our culture and time which celebrates personal achievement, this is perfectly natural. For the Israelites, our ancestors, personal achievement was unnatural - if good was wrought, it was wrought through God, first and foremost.

This way of thinking leads us directly to the verses which use the uncomfortable word “fear.” Fear for them didn’t have the terror connotation that it does in our language and in our time. To fear was to revere and hold in awe. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.” Revering God is the beginning of wisdom. We revere God when we recognize that **all** good comes through God. When we remember that all good comes through God, it is difficult, if not impossible, to **not** be in awe of God. Thomas Parker says:

Those who revere (fear) God live in a larger world, because they allow themselves to be open to something greater, something better, that lies deeply within even the most ordinary experiences. It is all too easy to be overfocused and miss the full range of reality in what we live through. It is so easy to let our lives be defined by the little world we have created through habits of mind and body that do not allow anything that may lie beyond to be registered in our awareness...To gain a healthy spiritual self-understanding, *we* need to remember that our lives are set in the midst of an unimaginable greatness and goodness...It really is all about cultivating a sense of the presence of God.²

Wise words, indeed. When we begin to understand how small we are compared to how big God is, we begin, merely begin, to have a fraction of wisdom about God; we begin to have a beginning of understanding; we begin to recognize just the very tip of the iceberg. Those in the synagogue in our reading from Mark had that fraction of wisdom revealed to them when they observed Jesus’ teaching

¹ *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 5*, p. 298.

² *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 5*, p. 298.

and were amazed at his authority. Their eyes were opened to the larger world around them filled with unimaginable greatness and goodness.

If we live in a way that allows such greatness and goodness, how might our eyes be opened? You can read in the February newsletter about my study leave learning but I'll give you a preview. What I gained was a reminder that the psalmist didn't need: God is always at work around us and in us; we need to remember to invite God into our lives and ask God to show us how we can serve God and God's purposes. The refrain repeats: cultivate a sense of the presence of God. And then let God go to work. Surely we have parts to play but we play them **after** listening for God's direction, instead of heading into plans and projects assured of our own rightness. And we are called as God's children to listen for God every time, every decision.

I won't mislead you - to listen for God in every decision is not easy. I was able to be more intentional when it was the main task I was charged with last week - even then I was far, very far from 100%. It has taken even greater thought and intentionality since I have been back. However, I was amazed, I would go so far as to say I was in awe, of what I experienced when I was awake and aware. It didn't happen every time but there were two especially remarkable moments when I knew that God had worked through me after I had prayed that God would use me. And that feeling made me want to create more opportunities for that to happen. In those moments in particular, my eyes were open to a glimpse of what God was doing.

Of course, I would encourage you to try the same AND I would also caution us all to heed the example of the psalmist. God is certainly great in the here and now but we limit God if we forget what God has done in the past or we don't use our imagination for what God could do in the future. We have before us a rich and deep history of God's acting in the world, of God's wonderful deeds. The Bible begins with the enormous deed of creating the world and carries us through the ways in which God acts in individual lives, making great Moses and David and Jacob and so many others with dubious starts. God saves the people Israel from slavery, God returns the people to her land Israel, God brings forth water and food and blessings and children and moments of beauty. And greater than creating the world, God comes as one of us to redeem the world through Jesus Christ. God has acted in the world for generations since Jesus came and died and rose. Praise the Lord!

God called ten people to begin the First Presbyterian Church of Prairieville in 1846. Over the 165+ years since then, God has called hundreds and hundreds more people to do God's work through this church. God brought us growth and the means to grow the building to accommodate more people. God inspired the people here to begin Zion Presbyterian Church to serve God's purposes in Pewaukee and God inspired the people here to begin Southminster Presbyterian Church to serve God's purposes on the

south edge of town. God brought forth the desire to begin Meals-on-Wheels. God gave the people of this church the wisdom and desire and means to make The Caring Place a reality. God sent us out into the community with the Chili Supper and the Potato Booth and Loaves and Fishes and to Hebron House. God showed us who we were to touch with God's love. And God brought **you** here. Praise the Lord! Great are the works of the Lord. Full of honor and majesty is his work. Let the renown of the deeds of **this** church be ascribed to God.

If we were to read ahead into Psalm 112, the counterpart and continuation of Psalm 111, we would see how God's people then responded to God's greatness and faithfulness. "They rise in the darkness as a light for the upright; they are gracious, merciful, and righteous...They have distributed freely, they have given to the poor." In Mark we read how, after Jesus' time teaching in the synagogue, "his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee." The first hearers made certain Jesus had gained renown by **his** wonderful deeds. Our responses to God's presence are still being written; we still have a part to play. God has proven to the generations before us that God has everything under control. If we are open and we let God use us, look what God can do and what God has done. So we remember, as assurance for the future, what God has been capable of in the past and we give thanks. After our thanks, let our prayers ask God to open our eyes to what God would have us do in the present and in the future. Let us ask that God use us for God's will and show us the people God wishes us to touch.

Let us pray: God of greatness, we praise you for all you have done in this world and in this church and for all the good to be found across time. We pray today that you will use us to do your will and that you will open our eyes to those people you wish us to see. Amen.