

Row, Row, Row Your Boat
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First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
June 5, 2016

Psalm 146

¹ Praise the Lord!

Praise the Lord, O my soul!

² I will praise the Lord as long as I live;
I will sing praises to my God all my life long.

³ Do not put your trust in princes,
in mortals, in whom there is no help.

⁴ When their breath departs, they return to the earth;
on that very day their plans perish.

⁵ Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,
whose hope is in the Lord their God,

⁶ who made heaven and earth,
the sea, and all that is in them;
who keeps faith for ever;

⁷ who executes justice for the oppressed;
who gives food to the hungry.

The Lord sets the prisoners free;

⁸ the Lord opens the eyes of the blind.
The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down;
the Lord loves the righteous.

⁹ The Lord watches over the strangers;
he upholds the orphan and the widow,
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

¹⁰ The Lord will reign for ever,
your God, O Zion, for all generations.
Praise the Lord!

Since Pentecost we've been talking about the differences between thinking of ourselves as being a church in a rowboat compared to being a church in a sailboat. A rowboat church figures God has given them everything they need to get on with their work and then left them to get to it. Joan Gray, in *Spiritual Leadership for Church Officers: A*

Handbook, explains it this way: “The bedrock reality of life in the rowboat church is that God has given the church a basic agenda (for example, to make the world a better place...) and then left it up to the church to get on with it.”¹ A sailboat church trusts God has equipped them but also believe God is still present and directing them as the wind in their sails. We all, as individuals and as church, strive to put our trust in God over our trust in our own abilities, at the very least to remember to listen and watch for God in all of our plan-making. Sometimes we succeed in this in measurements of days or moments; sometimes in measurements of seasons in the life of a church. Part of our human inclination is to lean toward trust in ourselves alone so it is an effort of faith to keep us mindful that trust in God is that to which we are called, in addition to, and above, our trust in ourselves. It’s not that trust in ourselves is inherently bad – without it, we would not follow our God-given instincts. It’s thinking that we don’t need God in the equation which sends us in the wrong direction, or at least off course.

The overarching message of Psalm 146 is praise of God’s greatness. In order to emphasize God’s greatness, the psalmist compares it to human power. We read, “Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals in whom there is no help.” In part, this is because human agendas can’t help but be influenced by human desires. Professor John B. Cobb, Jr. describes it this way: “God executes justice for the oppressed, feeds the hungry, and sets the prisoners free. Presumably the oppression is by powerful humans who so order society that some people are hungry and who imprison others.”² And even if the issue were not with destructive human goals, even if our goals were more closely aligned with God’s, we are far from immortal. The psalmist declares “When their breath departs, they return to the earth; on that very day their plans perish.” Cobb says, “The point is simply that all that they do is ephemeral.”³

Sometimes that’s for the best – our misguided plans die with us. Sometimes that means a particular, great, and God-focused vision dies with us. Thanks be to God that God doesn’t just guide one of us in order to further God’s will for the world! In the best

¹ Joan S. Gray, *Spiritual Leadership for Church Officers: A Handbook* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2009); p. 39.

² *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 3*, p. 104.

³ *Ibid*, p. 108.

circumstances the plans of the misguided fade quickly while God's plans endure. And even if the plans of the misguided carry through generations, God's plans **always** endure, are unchanging. The Lord sets the prisoners free – opens the eyes of the blind – lifts up those who are bowed down – loves the righteous – watches over the strangers – upholds the orphan and the widow. **These** are God's plans. Yesterday, today, tomorrow, God works toward this, not infrequently needing to work in opposition to the work of humans who seek to imprison, oppress, glorify that which is unrighteous.

We, as church and as believers, find what is within us to work with God's plans and we, as church and as believers, listen and watch for where God is directing us to use that which is within us. This listening and watching are work, equally matched with the work of maintaining our focus on God's plans over those of our own making, those we have colored with our own desires. In short, we work to try to get out of our own way. The psalmist proclaims "Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God." That's in contrast to those whose help is in themselves and other humans alone, whose hope is in their own abilities. Happy are those who throw away their oars.

As I typed that, I wondered to myself why that phrase felt familiar and, thanks to the internet, I found it. The 1984 REO Speedwagon song, *Can't Fight This Feeling*, includes the line "and throw away the oars forever." In finding it I was reminded again how easily we can pick out the themes of our faith in the everyday. While the song is written about a woman, listen to these lyrics, "I tell myself that I can't hold out forever / I say there is no reason for my fear / 'cause I feel so secure when we're together / You give my life direction / You make everything so clear // My life has been such a whirlwind since I saw you / I've been running round in circles in my mind / and it always seems that I'm following you, girl / 'cause you take me to the places / that alone I'd never find."⁴

You give my life direction, you make everything so clear. You take me to the places that alone I'd never find. Praise the Lord, O my soul! We give thanks for God's direction, for the meaning-making of our faith. We give thanks that God leads us to places we might not dare to go on our own, to do things for which we might otherwise lack courage. I'm not

⁴ REO Speedwagon, album: *Wheels Are Turnin'*, song: *Can't Fight This Feeling*, Epic Records: 1984.

certain this is what Kevin Cronin had in mind when he wrote the lyrics but it certainly fits. So, friends, Kevin Cronin and I say to you, there is no reason for your fear - it's time to throw away your oars forever. And the psalmist sings the refrain: Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God. So may it be for you and for me.

Let us pray: Lord, give us the courage to turn over control to you and to let you lead, we pray. Amen.