

PRAISE THE LORD!

Christmas 2 Year C

Jer. 31:7-14; Ps. 147:12-20; Eph. 1:3-14; Jn. 1:(1-9), 10-18

Gladstone 02/01/2022

2021 was not a great year for many people. For some it was worse than 2020. For some, perhaps, it was a little better. As we consider circumstances over the last two years, who could have predicted what has transpired? People and nations frozen in fear, others living in denial. The mad rush to isolate and to find a vaccine. It has not been easy for anyone, especially if you have loved ones you have not been able to visit or *vice versa*.

In other news, war in the Middle East has not abated, in fact it's become worse with the situation in Afghanistan under Taliban rule. North Korea and other nations ruled by despots continue to cruelly lord it over their subjects—executing its citizens for minor offences. One of the things we value mostly, particularly here in the western nations, our freedom to move around and go where we wish, has been largely taken away from us—thanks to the COVID pandemic. Yes, over time, I'm sure the situation will improve, but there is still a long way to go.

Every year, right at the beginning of the year, we usually spend time reflecting on the year that has just passed and give thanks to God for what God has given us and where God has led us. A lot of us probably don't really want to do that this year, because when we do, we see little else but pain, loneliness and struggles of all kinds—financial, health, relationships and so on. For many, there really doesn't seem to be much to give thanks for.

But then, we come today, on the first Sunday of another new year, 2022, and read Psalm 147, which begins with the words "Praise the Lord!" And even if we skip past the first 11 verses to verse 12, where the lectionary reading for today begins, we can't escape it—we still get the words, "Praise the Lord..." And if that's not enough, we also get it at the end of the psalm in verse 20—there it is again: "Praise the Lord!"

Now, I really didn't want to start off the year by preaching a lot of doom and gloom and a truck-load of negativity. I would much rather speak about hope and joy, but there you have it. Maybe we'll get to that in a little while, so don't go away—not just yet, anyway.

So, in spite of all that's happening around us and to us, do you ever get the feeling that maybe, just maybe, God is trying to tell us something—something about himself—in all this? By saying that, I don't mean that God is thrusting all this upon us as some kind of cruel way of making us sit up and take notice of Him—some sort of punishment for our

sinfulness. There are certainly enough people around the world suggesting that this is the case.

Rather, what I am suggesting is that through the trials and tribulations of our lives at the moment, God still wants to care for us and encourage us—wants us to look beyond our present circumstances to the hope that lies ahead.

Maybe, today, you don't feel like praising the Lord. That's ok. We understand. But there is still Psalm 147 for us to deal with.

"Praise the Lord! Or as Eugene Peterson renders it in his translation of the New Testament, *The Message*, "Hallelujah!" which, of course, is the Hebrew word, meaning to praise the Lord. Psalm 147 is one among the collection of Psalms 146-150, all of which begin and end with the exhortation to "Praise the Lord!" Psalm 147 is classified as a Community Hymn—a hymn of the people that celebrates God's sovereign reign over the community of faith and over all creation. The NRSV Bible gives the psalm the title, "Praise for God's Care for Jerusalem." The Good News Bible titles it: "In Praise of God the Almighty."

Despite all that is happening in the world—despite all that might be happening in your world or your life right now, if we bother to look—if we force ourselves to look—we can still find reasons to praise God. Despite all problems we are facing—despite all the evil in the world—open eyes and open hearts will find reason to glorify God—even for the smallest blessing.

So what is God to be praised for? Well, the short answer is everything. Our reading from this psalm, this morning, beginning at verse 12, provides at least two reasons. First, the psalmist exhorts God's people, who may have recently returned from exile, to praise God for blessing his people with the basics of life—namely, shelter and food. God has blessed his people by giving them Jerusalem, which is, at the moment, a safe and secure place to live. There is peace and prosperity within the city. That means physical prosperity, health, well-being, justice in the political and economic realms, a sense of unity and harmony among God's people, and spiritually, being in right relationship with God.

The second reason the psalmist gives for praising God is acknowledgement of God the Creator's sovereign rule over all of creation. The Creator is in control of all the elements, including: snow, frost, hail, wind and water. The wind, in Hebrew, *ruach*, can also mean

spirit—God’s creative Spirit—reminiscent of the time when, in Genesis, God created the universe and the Spirit of God moved across the face of the waters.

However, there is another interesting image the psalmist includes in verse 15: *“He (i.e. God) sends out his command to the earth; his word runs swiftly.”* This image surely, is a personification of God’s word.

That, of course, links us to our gospel text this morning from John, where Jesus is described as God’s Word, who always existed with the Creator and through whom the whole universe was created. After that, God surprised everyone: *“And the Word became flesh and lived among us.”* The Word became a human being. The Word literally pitched his tent among us (that’s what the Greek word means) in order to live in this world. Theologians call this the “Incarnation”. Jesus became a human being like us.

The gospel goes on to tell us that Jesus, the Word who became a human being like us, was however, without sin—instead, we are told that he “was full of grace and truth.” The writer says something else wonderful about Jesus’ fullness in verse 16: *“From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.”* Grace upon grace, or grace after grace, or as some translate it: grace instead of grace.

Grace upon grace, or grace after grace can be understood as grace never running out—there is always more than enough grace—it is God’s ever-constant renewable resource. Forget the hypothetical Perpetual Motion Machine, which can never exist or else it would violate either the first or second law of thermodynamics or both. God’s grace never runs out. The Good News Bible captures something of this way of understanding grace in verse 16: *“Out of the fullness of his grace he has blessed us all, giving us one blessing after another.”*

The biblical commentator, William Barclay, has suggested the translation, “grace instead of grace.” By that he means that there are different types of grace in the different stages of our life. God knows our needs when we are young, middle-aged and old, rich or poor, suffering or prospering, sad or joyful, and so on—hence God provides us with the type of grace that we need in the wide array of life’s circumstances.

Grace is something you can never get but only be given. There is no way to earn it or deserve it or bring it about in your own terms. A good sleep is grace and so are good dreams. Most tears are grace. The smell of rain is grace. Somebody loving you is grace. Loving somebody is grace.

The grace of God means something like: Here is your life. You might never have been, but you are because the party wouldn't have been complete without you. Here is the world. Beautiful and wonderful things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. I love you. Nothing can ever separate us. It's for you I created the universe. I love you.

There's only one catch. Like any other gift, the gift of grace can be yours only if you reach out and take it. Maybe being able to reach out and take it is a gift, too. Many scholars have suggested this.

There is a story which illustrates this nicely. John and Emma were an elderly couple, who often had barely enough to make ends meet. One Christmas, Emma decided they would give themselves a treat: she would make a Christmas pudding.

However, when she saw the result—a huge, rich pudding—she felt it was such an extravagance for the two of them, so she wrote an anonymous note, fastened it to the pudding, wrapped it up and placed it on the step of the local Children's Home.

Now, as grateful as the Matron was, she really had more puddings than she knew what to do with, but she thought that the pastor would appreciate it, so she left it on his doorstep.

But the pastor, who was always thinking of others rather than himself, thought there must be someone in the village who needed this more than him—John and Emma, of course!

So the pudding completed its journey. Christmas is, after all, about giving *and* receiving!

The greatest gift we can receive and then give, and then receive over and over again is Jesus and his gift of grace upon grace. Grace that never runs out, Grace that never stops. Grace that never gives up on you or me or anybody. Jesus the Word becoming flesh and living among us is, as the psalmist says, God's word that runs swiftly—swiftly to every corner of the world to offer his loving grace to all people.

So, during this season of Christmas we continue to celebrate the birth of Jesus, the Word becoming flesh and living among us. As Jesus continues to live within and among us, let us praise the Lord! Surely, this is more than enough reason. It's certainly a good place to start.

To him be all glory, honour, majesty and praise. Amen.

Love came down at Christmas

1 Love came down at Christmas,
love all lovely, Love divine;
Love was born at Christmas;
star and angels gave the sign.

2 Worship we the Godhead,
Love incarnate, Love divine;
worship we our Jesus,
but wherewith for sacred sign?

3 Love shall be our token;
love be yours and love be mine;
love to God and others,
love for plea and gift and sign.