

**Some Dates Are Worth Remembering**  
**A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church**  
**1-31-2016**  
**Psalm 138**

As historians, we often fall prey to believing that dates on a calendar represent realized change. We celebrate July 4, 1776 as America's birthday, even though the Revolutionary War would drag on for several more years. The Emancipation Proclamation was issued on January 1, 1863, but it would still be decades before most freed-persons realized full citizenship. We acknowledge that the effects of the Great Depression began to dissipate with the onset of WWII, but its aftershock could be felt well into the 1950s. Dates help us to organize periods of history, but they don't necessarily reflect the pace of change. Change doesn't occur on a clock-strike, it is gradual.

As biblical historians, we pay particular attention to Israel's exile. Jerusalem was sacked in 587 BCE. Most folks were carried off to Babylon. Fifty years later, in 539 BCE, King Cyrus of Persia issued a decree that the people of Judaea could return to their homeland and rebuild their temple. We refer to the century directly after Cyrus's decree as the post-exilic period. But often times, we tend to believe that life was easy after Cyrus' decree. It wasn't. The Jewish people returned home to a land decimated by war – no infrastructure, a capital city in shambles, and fields untended. And it stayed that way for a long time. As a matter of fact, the new temple was not completed until 516, more than twenty years after Cyrus's decree. It may be easy to envision the Jerusalem of 539 in much the same way we envision North Carolina during Reconstruction or Europe during the early phases of the Marshall Plan. Jerusalem was still broken. The exile was over. The hard work was not.

This is the context of today's Psalm. The psalmist lived in a Jerusalem that was being put back together. And the psalmist worshiped in a temple that was most likely incomplete, and if it was complete, it was modest, only a shell of Solomon's original Temple.

In this setting, we might expect our psalmist to pen a whiny psalm – one that speaks of disappointment and agitation for a world that doesn't change fast enough. Perhaps we'd expect a psalm with very little energy and enthusiasm.

We get the opposite. The psalmist gives us instructions for full and proper worship of God in any age and any setting.

The psalmist tell us three things: 1) Why we should worship God 2) How we should worship God and 3) What happens when we worship God.

**Why should we worship God?** God's character. The psalmist reveals that God is faithful, consistent, and true to God's word:

I bow down toward your Holy Temple and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness; for you have exalted your name and your word above everything.

The psalmist tells us that ours is the God of Abraham and Jacob and David. This is a God who honors covenant, whose faithfulness endures for all generations.

But the Psalmist doesn't stop there. The psalmist gives evidence of God's faithfulness:

On the day I called, you answered me, you increased my strength of soul.

And again in the third stanza:

Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve me against the wrath of my enemies; you stretch out your hand, and your right hand delivers me.

The psalmist is referring to the mighty acts that God has performed, is performing, and will perform for the people of Israel. This is the God who parted the Red Sea. When the Israelites fled Egypt, it wasn't long before Pharaoh's army pinned them against a vast body of water. They found themselves stuck between two unenviable scenarios: certain death by sea, or certain surrender to an army that would send them back to a life of captivity. But God provided salvation – space, a clearing in the sea that led them to safety, that gave them room to become God's people. The psalmist tells us that God offers each of us that same space – space from fear or grief or loneliness or anger or other burdens and barriers that crowd us out from life's fullness, that impede us from our potential.

Why should we worship God? Our God is good. The psalmist tells us that God is our deliverer, our salvation, our space!

**How should we worship this good God of ours?** The Psalmist tells us we should worship God with our windows rolled down.

What do I mean by that? Most of you know that I can't carry a tune in a bucket – Unfortunately, Tillie has to hear me every Sunday! But despite my limited singing ability, I am able to find confidence behind my steering wheel. Each morning, as I drive to work, wheels rolling, 95.7 FM the Ride blaring, I am somehow transformed into the lead singer of the Rolling Stones, the Beatles, the Heartbreakers, and a hundred other bands coming out of my speakers. And I sound good! Really good. And I don't give a hoot what anybody thinks. That is until I get to the stoplight. At which point, I quickly roll up my windows, and silently hum along...Until... the wheels start moving again and then it's back to being Mick Jagger!!!

The psalmist says, "If you wanna praise your maker, really praise your maker, don't worry about being cool. Don't worship like your sittin' at the stoplight. Worship with your windows rolled down!"

The psalmist proclaims:

I give thanks to you, O Lord, with my whole heart; before the Gods, I sing your praise.

Our psalmist is excited, committed, passionate. The psalmist implores us to worship God with our all – our whole heart, our whole being. The temple is the setting – it is the place where God and all the heavenly host gather. The psalmist will worship in a way that is public and pronounced and pleasing to God's assembly. There is singing. Loud singing. And the windows are rolled down.

The psalmist says, "If you wanna praise your maker, really praise your maker, don't worship like your sittin' at the stoplight. Worship with your windows rolled down!"

**What happens when we praise our good God with the windows rolled down?**

The psalmist tells us that kings take notice, the humble are exalted, and God's purpose is fulfilled.

The psalmist tells us that God is so big and so good and so compelling, that even kings take notice. The goodness of God is contagious. When the powers and principalities of this world see God acting, see God intervening and changing the world, they too praise God:

All the kings of the earth shall praise you, O Lord. For they have heard the words of your mouth.  
They shall sing the ways of the Lord, for great is the glory of the Lord.

When we worship, we participate in our highest calling – we proclaim that this world is God's world, and we invite all to be a part of it. When we worship, we make known a God of possibilities, the God who exalts the humble and humbles the mighty:

For though the Lord is high, he regards the lowly; but the haughty he perceives from far away.

And when we worship, God's purpose is fulfilled. When we worship, we mimic the rhythms of our past: the covenantal community of Israel, a people in communication with God, grateful for God's presence, trusting in God's protection, confident in God's deliverance. When we worship, we acknowledge the God who heard Israel in Egypt and the wilderness, who heard humble servants like Hannah and Mary, and a God who hears us now. But not just a God who hears, but One who acts and intervenes on our behalf.

The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever. Do not forsake the work of your hands.

I love that last part! Did you catch it? "The work of your hands." In a temple God has built, filled with people God has created, the psalmists says, "God, do not forget the plans you have for us!"

The psalmist reminds us that we are in relationship with God. Each of us here belong to relationships: we have spouses, siblings, children, parents, friends, co-workers, neighbors, and on and on. The health of every relationship is contingent upon communication – If we want our relationships to thrive, we must express the value and love we feel for our partners, as well our expectations of them, and sometimes, even our frustrations. The same is true with God! Worship is a vehicle to healthy relationship with God: when we sing, pray, dance, laugh, gather, and reflect, we make known our love for God, and our expectations for how God will take part in our lives, and ours in God, both individually and communally.

So there you have it: Psalm 138 gives a wonderful summary of worship. Why should we worship God? Because God is good! And how should we worship this good God? With exuberance, with our windows rolled down! And what happens, when we worship our good God with exuberance? We fulfill our purpose – we live into relationship with God!

Now that we've heard this psalm, the question for us is: "What will we do with these words?"

Back to that idea of historical dates. It's true that one single historical marker cannot represent full and complete transformation. Change takes time. But dates can represent a start, a beginning, a push to something better.

One day, God told an old couple named Abram and Sarai that they'd bear a son, and Israel's future began to take shape. One day Moses met YHWH at a burning bush, and Israel's fate began to change. One day, some 2,500 years ago, a psalmist penned Psalm 138. The people gathered at the temple, the scaffolding still visible, the crowds not nearly what they used to be. But eventually, the modern worship of Israel took shape.

And on a January day in 2016, a people gathered in Charlotte, North Carolina, and heard the familiar words of the psalmist, and little did they know, their future was also taking shape.

A hundred years from now, when the historians tell the story of this place, I wonder what they'll write?

Here's what I hope:

31 January, 2016. That was the day the people left with a new resolve. They noticed their good God. They prayed with enthusiasm, they sang loudly, they loved boldly, they believed in God's transforming power. And with the psalmist they asked their God, "Lord, do not forsake the work of your hands."

God did not forsake this people, nor they their God. And nor shall we.

Friends, may it always, always, always be so. Amen.