

Christmas for Everybody and Everything
Bob Stillerman
First Sunday After Christmas, New Year's Day
Psalm 148
1/1/2023



a spiritually
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Christmas came early for our family this year. Lucy's Leopards Class (three and four-year-old children) performed a Christmas pageant, and their lineup included the song, *Oh What a Special Night*. The first verse of the song goes like this (but note the full effect is only realized in hearing its lyrics sung by enthusiastic children):

Oh what a special night
Baby Jesus was born
The sheep who were there that day
Sang a song for his birthday
And this is what they sang
Baa, baa, babba, baa, baa, baa
Thank you, God, for baby Jesus
Baa, baa, babba, baa, baa, baa
Baby Jesus is born

Verse two features the cows and their moo-moo-moos, followed by the donkeys and their hee-haw-haws.

I LOVE, LOVE, LOVE Christmas songs that remind us not only of God's redemptive purposes for humanity, but for ALL creation. Joy to the world, all the boys and girls now; joy to the fishes in the deep blue sea; joy to you and me; Joy to the WHOLE-WIDE world, for indeed, the Lord is come!

It's fitting that our text today is a hymn of praise celebrating God's solidarity with *ALL of God's creation* voiced by *ALL of God's creation*.

It's Christmas week, y'all, and God's doing a new thing with everybody and everything in all of creation. Christmas means a new creation for all creation!

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But we're not reading a traditional Christmas text today – we're saving the wise women and men for next week on Epiphany. And we read Luke 2 on Christmas Eve. You might be thinking: "This psalm is nice, but what's it got to do with Christmas? We can sing praises anytime of the year, right?"

I would argue that today's psalm is the quintessential Christmas text. And I would also argue that praise is a quintessential Christmas action.

Let's chat for a moment about why Psalm 148 (or any psalm of praise for that matter) is important, and how the psalmist offers praise.

What's the big deal about praise? When we praise our Creator, I believe that means we do three things:

- 1) We converse with God, expressing our happiness, our delight, and our thanksgiving for being made/created in the image of God.
- 2) We acknowledge our purpose – that is to love what God has created – all of creation – by using the gifts that God has given us.
- 3) We celebrate our connectedness as part of God's creation.

Why is praise important? Praise centers us in our purpose, and readies us to experience God's newness in the world. Advent reminded us to get ready for God's arrival. This morning, the Psalmist is telling us God's presence is here now, and there's reason to rejoice!

In today's text, the author mentions a collection of 32 parts of creation, all simultaneously praising God, all communicating together. Lemme give you a snapshot:

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The conductor raises her baton, and the orchestra includes: sun and moon speaking in tongues of light; waters splashing, oceans tumbling, rivers rushing, fish flapping, whales and walruses bellowing, dolphins squeaking, rain pitter-pattering, winds whistling, mountains and hills adding visual delight with their greens, blues, and purples; flowers and plants adding a sweet aroma; cows mooing, pigs oinking, dogs barking, bees buzzing; kings and princes and everyday Janes and Joes singing as best they can....Maybe it's one beautiful congruent note; maybe it's an unbelievable racket, maybe it's both. God dwells in the messy, and in the ordered, in the silence, and in the song. It a chorus; God's chorus! Emmanuel has come, and not only that, but Emmanuel is singing in the season with us!

And think of all the purpose that is fulfilled in such a gathering: some create heat and light to power a world; some make milk to feed a world; some offer shade; some quench thirst; some are poetry in motion; some offer companionship; All are vital, all love in their own unique way. All have been given purpose by a Creator; all have been endowed with unique gifts; all are loved by God, and even better, enjoyed by God.

And what a celebration! This very morning, we gather to sing praises for our God. And heaven and nature sing! Yes, yes, yes, we have our own little chorus inside of these walls. But the sun and swaying branches are giving voice to the worship window, and there are deer dancing about on our lawn, and maybe there's a bluebird still on the fence about wintering in North Carolina. The squirrels, and holly bushes, and whatever else fills our church grounds are joining us. Think about the beauty. Think about the diversity. Think about the creativity. All of it a gift of God. That's a chorus I want to be a part of!

This kind of praise matters. It does. It really, really does! Such collective, communal praise connects us as human beings – we need to know that whether we are vulnerable or mighty, wise or foolish, young or old, or sitting upon any spectrum of life, we are bound together by a higher, more pure,

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more real, more true love than we can ever comprehend. And as old-fashioned as it might sound, I don't think we ever begin to fully understand our value as children of God, until we hear it out loud, and speak it out loud, and act it out loud – both the giving and receiving. And it sure seems like the first Sunday after Christmas (not to mention New Year's Day!) is as good a time as any to get started.

And then, when such praise, transcends the boundaries of human community, to include all the components of our biosphere, our connection to and our empathy for other created beings is enhanced. And I think that means our world is better protected.

When I hear today's text, it makes me eager to listen for the chorus of creation. To find kinship in its myriad of created beings. To praise God in community. To see Christmas beyond the singular lens of humanity.

And in just the same way that identifying my human neighbors as God's beloved makes me see them in a new light, the same is true for my non-human neighbors. If they have been created as God's beloved, deemed worthy, and given gifts to share, then I need to be mindful of how my actions, how my words, and how the faith I live out impacts their wellbeing.

Friends, praise has the power to change our perspectives. Praise has the power to broaden the reach of Emmanuel. Praise reminds us that our Fa-la-la-las are incomplete if they don't also include our baa-baa-baas.

Good friends, may we be a community whose praise leads us to care for all whom God has made, and for all who praise God alongside us. May our Christmas be a new creation for all creation!

Amen.