

## **Psalm 111**

### **Praise for God's Wonderful Works**

<sup>1</sup> Praise the Lord!

I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart,  
in the company of the upright, in the congregation.

<sup>2</sup> Great are the works of the Lord,  
studied by all who delight in them.

<sup>3</sup> Full of honour and majesty is his work,  
and his righteousness endures for ever.

<sup>4</sup> He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds;  
the Lord is gracious and merciful.

<sup>5</sup> He provides food for those who fear him;  
he is ever mindful of his covenant.

<sup>6</sup> He has shown his people the power of his works,  
in giving them the heritage of the nations.

<sup>7</sup> The works of his hands are faithful and just;  
all his precepts are trustworthy.

<sup>8</sup> They are established for ever and ever,  
to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.

<sup>9</sup> He sent redemption to his people;  
he has commanded his covenant for ever.  
Holy and awesome is his name.

<sup>10</sup> The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;  
all those who practice it have a good understanding.  
His praise endures for ever.

When I was about seven years old, Santa gave me a life size baby doll with a layette. The layette was beautiful, all handmade. I received a baby basket, lined and matching the rest of the items for the doll which included a baby blanket, a bonnet, and clothes.

I exclaimed with amazement and gratitude - wow! This is amazing. So fabulous. Then, I turned to my mother, the sewer in our family, and said, Mrs. Claus sews better than you do.

Now, my mother knew who had sewed the layette and she wasn't offended by my comments although she did think they were funny. She didn't feel the need to step in and claim credit for Mrs. Claus accomplishments. She just smiled and said, "I am glad you love your gift."

Only years later did we talk about my naivety as a seven year old and laugh about my misplaced gratitude. My mom hadn't made those gifts so that I would offer her gratitude. She made them for my delight and joy.

God is the same. God does not do great works, or give us good, or keep covenant in order to garner our gratitude. God does it for our joy and delight, because God loves us, because God is creator, because God is love.

Our gratitude matters not for God's sake but for our sake. When I was seven, it didn't matter that I attribute the beautiful sewing to Mrs. Claus. Like I said, my mom had not made those gifts so that I would show her gratitude, But knowing the source of the talent, the source of the gift, would come to matter later in my life.

For example, knowing that it was my mom who sewed with such beauty and talent, and showing gratitude and appreciation for her gifts meant that when I needed a robe for my commissioning and ordination, I knew I could turn to my mom and trust her to sew something beautiful for me.

As we stood in the fabric store, searching for clergy robe patterns. Not finding anything suitable for a female clergy person, I knew that when she proposed using a pattern for a mumu, that she was trustworthy and could turn that pattern into this beautiful robe that I still wear years later.

Gratitude is the beginning of trust. When we say thank you, or in the case of the psalmist. Move beyond thanksgiving into wonder and praise, we open ourselves to something beyond us. We acknowledge the work of another in our lives.

Sometimes our gratitude comes in acknowledging that someone has done something for us that we could have done ourselves. Think of thanking someone for handing you something for example. You most likely could have retrieved the item yourself but your life was made easier, better, through the help of another person.

But there are times when our gratitude extends well beyond our own capabilities. The truth is, I never learned to sew. I could no more take a mumu pattern and turn it into this robe than I could stand here and turn my hair purple. The process of making this garment is well beyond me.

My gratitude, my acknowledgement of the talent my mom has is an act of trust. I trust you to do what I cannot do, what I cannot even fully comprehend. I see that You can do what I cannot.

When we open ourselves to gratitude, when we begin to see the world around us with thanksgiving and wonder, we begin to notice all that is here that we have no part in creating. The birds in the sky, the fish that swim in the sea, the elephants with their long trunks, the okapi that looks like a half horse, half zebra but is really related to a giraffe, the majesty of mountains like Mount Rainier, it is all beyond us.

In some ways this feels like circling back to where we started in this series - with the idea of our God as transcendent and awe inspiring. And it is. But our psalm this week is asking us to move beyond wonder and awe into gratitude which allows us to let go of believing we have control over everything and opens us up to trust and ultimately to faith.

If we look around and see all that God has done, is doing, has promised to do, we can cultivate the wisdom the psalmist describes. Wisdom is knowing who we are and what we can do , and who God is and what God can do and not confusing the two. I can participate with God in caring for creation, I can be creative as a gift given to me from God, I cannot raise mountains or paint the trees with the glorious colors of spring, or conceive of creating an animal as fast as the cheetah.

Knowing our place, and God's place, allows us then to turn to God for help.

When I knew how capable my mom is at sewing, I could ask her for help with my robe for ordination. When I know who God is, I can turn to God when I am in need. Which is really all the time.

Gratitude centers God in our lives and decenters ourselves. It places us in right relationship with God and invites us into the righteousness and goodness of God's ways. It removes the burden of everything resting on us from our shoulders.

Gratitude, by its very nature, invites us to let go of control and open our hands to the good gifts that God has given us. It invites us to turn away from always being in charge to turn towards the One who is.

And it can sustain us through the trials of life. The truth is, that life is not always easy or good. We all face hardships, doubts, questions, grief, pain, and despair. It is so often in these places of heartache that we turn away from God and at the sametime, blame ourselves for our situation. Why did I do this? Or not do that? Why can't I just? Or why is this happening to me?

In our Scriptural text, we find the wisdom of praise and gratitude even in Psalms of lament and complaint because “God is good all the time and all the time God is good!” Life is not always good, but when we engage in gratitude, we remember the evidence of God at work in our lives and we remember that indeed, God is holding our lives, even now.

The practice of gratitude, and it is a practice, not just a spontaneous emotion that should well up inside of us without intentionality and cultivation, is perhaps one of the simplest and most generative spiritual practices there is.

In just a few weeks, we are moving into the season of Lent, a time when we talk about intentional spiritual practices that help us make space for God in our lives. Sometimes, those practices involve giving something up, or taking something away. But sometimes, they are the practice of adding something, like a daily gratitude ritual. Consider adding intentional praise and gratitude to your spiritual life. You don’t even need to wait for Lent.

Here are some ways you might do it.

1. Keep a gratitude journal. Every day write down three things you are grateful for from that day. Doing this will not only cultivate gratitude, it will grow

awareness and presence. You will begin noticing the good gifts all around you in ways you might not have before.

2. Start a gratitude practice around your dinner table. Each night invite every person gathered around the table to name at least one thing they want to offer thanks for. Maybe write them down and look back over the list at the end of the week.
3. Write thank you notes. Write them to people but think of writing them to God as well. You can do this as a prayer that is not written down or you can put pen to paper and see where your thanksgiving leads you when you are writing to God.

There are so many other practices that you might embody as acts of gratitude and praise. I invite you to be creative and to allow yourself to notice the goodness of God that is all around you.

This morning, as we take Communion, we will engage in a liturgy known as The Great Thanksgiving. The practice of thanksgiving is so much a part of our faith that before we come to the Lord's Table we give thanks and praise to the God who has given us so much. As you come forward, while you sit in the pew before or after, while you kneel at the prayer rail this morning, I invite you to a gratitude practice. Name three things you are grateful for right here right now. See how it changes the receiving of the bread, and the cup.

You might find that gratitude practices not only changes your faith but also changes your behavior. Author Ann Lamont, in her book on prayer called Help, Thanks, Wow says this,

“Gratitude begins in our hearts and then dovetails into behavior. It almost always makes you willing to be of service, which is where the joy resides. It means that you are willing to stop being such a jerk. When you are aware of all that has been given to you, in your lifetime and the past few days, it is hard not to be humbled, and pleased to give back.”

Gratitude is not only faith changing but it can be life changing and world changing if it inspires us to act in accordance with the goodness of God. How much more inspired might we be to care for God’s creation, to care for God’s people, to care for the resources God has entrusted to us when we root and ground ourselves in praise of the God who is holding our lives.

Earlier this month, Angelina invited the people attending Kids Church Party to choose an intention word for the new year for our children. Something we wanted for them in the new year.

I love practices like this, but one of the temptations is to feel responsible for making it happen rather than noticing and observing what God is doing and going where God leads.

I wrote the word joy for Sophia. Someday, in another sermon, I might tell you more about how God led me to that word for Sophia this year.

By the time we were supposed to present our words to our kids Sophia had left KCP to go to youth group. I never gave her the star word. Instead, I hung it on the bulletin board in my office, a prayer that I pray daily for her.

At our first Affinity night, two weeks ago, Sophia and I were here. I went to yoga in The Gathering Place and Sophia stayed in the library area to play board games. If you were in that yoga group, you know how loud the board game group was. I just want to say, all of those screams of delight, all of that loud laughter, that was my daughter.

Yoga is a meditative practice, especially at the end when we lay down and get still. While everyone in The Gathering Place was silent, the board game group was not. At one point, as we lay in our seven minutes of silence, I heard my daughter through the walls let out the loudest laugh. I found myself trying hard to not laugh out loud myself. And then I realized. Joy. I was hearing pure joy from Sophia. An answer to my prayer.

There was nothing I could do but utter, in a quiet whisper, thank you, thank you, thank you. That prayer, for joy in Sophia's life, was an act of entrusting her into God's hand, trusting that God is holding her life. God gave me a moment of joy, of epiphany, in witnessing the answer to my prayer and the assurance that God is holding our lives.