

2013

ELCIC Praise A P P E A L

SERMON

Grace to you and peace in the name of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. It is a delight to bring you greetings on behalf of your sisters and brothers in Christ from coast, to coast, to coast across the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada. Thank you for choosing to participate in the ELCIC Praise Appeal and for your support of the work of the wider church. The theme for this year's Praise Appeal is Let the peoples praise you, O God which comes from Psalm 67.

The psalm expands Let the peoples praise you, O God; Let all the people praise you. Hebrew poetry is a form built around repetition. Often the second half of the verse is an expansion of the idea in the first verse. But this is extreme repetition, like underlining in red!

So why are we enjoined to praise God? First of all, because praising God puts life in perspective. When we praise God we remember that everything—creation, life itself—comes from God. All that we have, all that we are, comes to us as a gift from God. It reminds us that God is God, and we are not. And these days, in a culture that encourages us to put ourselves first, it is an important and even counter-cultural act to praise God and put God in first place.

Sometimes praising God is easy. In the case of a near-accident or deliverance from some kind of other trouble, it is easy to thank God. In experiences of jaw-dropping beauty, in nature or in art, it is easy to praise God. But on a day to day basis as we get caught up in the business and busyness of our life it is easy to forget to praise God and keep God first and foremost in our lives. So the psalmist is reminding us to keep first things first and to carve out time in our lives to praise God.

Sometimes praising God is easy, but sometimes it is hard, even counter-intuitive. In times of sorrow and adversity praising God is often not the first thing to come to mind. And that is ok. The psalms are also full of lament—crying out at God for the misery being experienced, be it personal or corporate—illness, death, natural disaster, and all other kinds of adversity. But most of those psalms end with some kind of assurance of God's goodness, or praise of God's faithfulness.

In one of his books on preaching Fred Craddock talks about doxology as he recounts the story of being called from a class he was teaching, only to receive news over the telephone that his eldest brother had just died of a heart attack. Immediately he began the busy work associated with times such as that. He arranged to get the children out of school. His wife got time off work. He arranged for a colleague to take his classes. In a flurry the car was packed and off they went.

All night long they drove across several states, eyes pasted open, conversation spasmodic and consisting primarily of asking the same questions over and over. No-one pretended to have the answers. And as they drew near the town and home of Craddock's sister-in-law he searched his mind for a word; the first word he would share with the widow. He writes, "I was still searching when we pulled into the driveway. She came out to meet us and as I opened the car door, still not knowing what the word would be, she broke the silence. "I hope you brought doxology."

Doxology?" Craddock write, "No I had not. I had not even thought of doxology since the phone call, but in her question the truth became clear. For if we ever lose our doxology - our praise of God, - then we might as well be dead."

It's true! As people of faith, the biggest difference between the way we approach life and the way that others approach life is our ability to remember and claim God's love and faithfulness even as we experience hardship in life. God is with us, and holds us with strong and loving arms even as we experience the "slings and arrows" of life. God is always worthy of our praise, no matter what our personal circumstances.

Praising God in times of difficulty or sorrow as well as times of joy is one of the ways we are able to witness to our faith. The full verse of the psalm is "Let the peoples praise you, O God; Let all the people praise you." We live in a country and in a world where Christianity is more and more in a minority position. Yet the psalm calls on all the people to praise God. Conversion is the work of the Holy Spirit, it is not our responsibility. But it is our responsibility to share our faith. Praising God, as we are able, is one way that we can take on that responsibility.

Perhaps the most compelling reason to praise God is because God is good! The psalm reminds us that our good and loving God blesses us! God brings prosperity to the earth. God judges the peoples with equity. How can we help but praise such a good a gracious God?

If you look at the Praise Appeal logo you will see a stylized human figure representing the letter "I". That "I" is you! You and me and others who say "I praise God for all the gifts I have been given". "I want to be generous in giving back to God from the bounty I have received" "I am proud of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada and want to support its ministry and the ministry of the wider church".

Through your gift to the Praise Appeal you support our ministry with international and ecumenical partners. You reach out through Lutheran World Federation as the second largest provider of refugee services in the world, serving one and a half million refugees on a daily basis. You support ministry we are doing in indigenous communities in Argentina and Peru with our partner churches. You work to achieve better relationships with other denominations and faiths here in Canada, through the Canadian Council of Churches, and around the world through the World Council of Churches. You support the National Church in its call to Spiritual Renewal, working to deepen the discipleship of all of our members and learning new ways to reach out in faith to those around us. Your financial support of the National Church through the Praise Appeal helps us to accomplish all these things.

We are being called to praise God to serve as a witness to those around us of the bounty, grace and justice that we receive from our God.

I am excited for the future of our church, and I hope that you are too! Despite the many challenges we face, we know that in the end it is God's church! We do not know for sure how things are going to turn out but we know that with God they will be good. As faithful people committed to praising God, we know that with God we will be blessed and that with God's help we will be a blessing to others.

Thank you again for your commitment to praising God, and for your support of our collective work in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada. Thank you for your support and participation in this Praise Appeal. May God bless and strengthen your ministry both individually and together.