



WORSHIP AND ARTS SUNDAY
(Formerly known as Choir Anniversary Sunday)

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, September 22, 2013

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Lection – Psalm 20:1-5; Psalm 33:1-4; and Psalm 149:1-4 (New Revised Standard Version)

Psalm 20:1-5

(v. 1) The LORD answer you in the day of trouble! The name of the God of Jacob protect you! (v. 2) May he send you help from the sanctuary, and give you support from Zion. (v. 3) May he remember all your offerings, and regard with favor your burnt sacrifices. (Selah) (v. 4) May he grant you your heart's desire, and fulfill all your plans. (v. 5) May we shout for joy over your victory, and in the name of our God set up our banners. May the LORD fulfill all your petitions.

Psalm 33:1-4

(v. 1) Rejoice in the LORD, O you righteous. Praise befits the upright. (v. 2) Praise the LORD with the lyre; make melody to him with the harp of ten strings. (v. 3) Sing to him a new song; play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts. (v. 4) For the word of the LORD is upright, and all his work is done in faithfulness.

Psalm 149:1-4

(v. 1) Praise the Lord! Sing to the LORD a new song, his praise in the assembly of the faithful. (v. 2) Let Israel be glad in its Maker; let the children of Zion rejoice in their King. (v. 3) Let them praise his name with dancing, making melody to him with tambourine and lyre. (v. 4) For the LORD takes pleasure in his people; he adorns the humble with victory.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

During slavery, music and giving praise to God were vital to slave life and culture. The enslaved sang and praised God in hope for the freedom they believed was coming. In the years post-slavery, African Americans have continued to praise God in various ways as part of our Christian experience in America. On Worship and Arts Sunday, we have a wonderful opportunity to celebrate the freedom found in many of our congregations to express our praise to God while holding fast to our rich musical heritage, inclusive of spirituals, hymns, traditional gospel, contemporary gospel, and even gospel rap. All of these are important to our Sunday and mid-week worship experiences.

Not only music, but in many modern African American congregations, dance and mime ministries have become part of worship services. A true worship service at its best, where the presence of God is the main element, is one where all facets of the Worship Arts Ministry—choirs/praise teams, dance, mime, drama teams, worship leaders, and musicians—play a joint role in the overall worship experience. On Worship and Arts Sunday, we observe and celebrate all of these facets. See today's cultural resource unit by Dr. Tammy Kernodle for great historical and cultural information on African American worship and arts traditions.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Psalm 20:1-5; Psalm 33:1-4; and Psalm 149:1-4

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

We live in a world where it is not always easy to render praise to God. The heart-wrenching daily circumstances we encounter include children being gunned-down at school or abused by their parents to the point of death, both at alarming rates. There are pulpit scandals, job layoffs, gross inequities in our justice system, members of the United States Congress refusing to work with our President for the good of all Americans, an education system that sorely needs fixing, and CEOs who give themselves multimillion-dollar bonuses while laying off their workers or underpaying them. What reason do we have to praise God amidst all of this? Some of us cannot even see His movement and love in a world that has changed so much right before our eyes. Today's scriptural passages serve to encourage all of us to keep our focus on the one true God who still gives us so many reasons to offer praise.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

In Psalm 20:1-5, one of the Scriptures for today, we see the people of Israel praying for the king. Historically, this psalm was a liturgical hymn used ceremoniously upon the king going into battle. It is referred to as a messianic psalm because it refers to the king and his rule. There are a couple of schools of thought as to authorship. "A Psalm of David" could mean it was written

about David, and not necessarily written by David. The occasion that brought about the writing of this Psalm may have been the beginning of a war with Syria at some point after the Ark of the Covenant was returned to Jerusalem. In verses 1 and 2, synonymous parallelism is present, as is common in Hebrew poetry. The people are praying that the Lord answer the king who is in trouble (we must all confront trouble at some point in our Christian experience), that the name of the Lord protect him (the God of Israel still defends the faithful), that the Lord send help from the sanctuary (there is no greater help than that which God sends), and that the Lord would give support from Zion (nothing gives a saint of God more strength than that of fellow saints in the congregation praying for him). Verses 3 and 4 are further prayers that God would remember the king's burnt offerings and accept his sacrifices (the king's success was riding on his sacrifices and the acceptance of them). Verse 5 was a "yet" praise in that they were already believing in victory. Victory belongs to the Lord, but it is ours in which to rejoice.

This psalm speaks of human warfare, but we can also look at it in terms of spiritual warfare. Do we pray for our secular and church leaders? Do we pray that God would send the help needed? Do we trust God for the victory and so rejoice? This psalm is well-suited for Worship and Arts Sunday, as those who lead in worship know that their work supports the work of others, especially pastors. Those being supported are in constant need of prayer by Worship and Arts team members. Additionally Worship and Arts team members who are anointed and appointed to serve also know that victory belongs to the Lord, but it is ours in which to rejoice.

In the second psalm, Psalm 33:1-4, we are not told that this is a Psalm of David, but the writer does make it very clear who the target audience is for this praise hymn. The righteous are called upon to rejoice because praise is befitting for the upright. Among many ways God has given us to praise Him, verses 2 and 3 give us the lyre and harp of ten strings as instruments of praise to God. Verse 3 is an invitation to sing to him a new song and play skillfully with loud shouts. Given the greatness of our God, boisterous praise makes sense. The Psalmist's desire is that God be praised. We don't shout because God can't hear us but because Scripture commands it and so do our grateful hearts. Though not all praise occurs at a loud level, no offense should be taken to those who choose to boisterously praise God.

The Psalmist is very specific concerning to whom he is speaking—the righteous. We are invited to praise God's as his righteous people. We are invited to use instruments and sing praise to Him. However, if there were no instruments and no singing, we are still to follow the divine mandate to praise God. Praise in Scripture is not a request; it is a command. Worship is also a command (see John 4:23-24; Matthew 4:10; Deuteronomy 6:13-15).

Verse 4 gives us another reason to praise God. We see that the Word of the Lord is upright, and all His work is done in faithfulness. Again, as is common in Hebrew poetry, we see synthetic parallelism in that the second phrase expands on the first.

In the final psalm, Psalm 149:1-4, we find another command to praise God. This psalm is among a group called the "Hallelujah" Psalms because they all begin and/or end with the Hebrew imperative "Praise the Lord" or "Hallelujah." Here, the church (the assembly of the faithful) is called upon to praise God definitely in public among other saints. Our entire mission in coming together on Sunday morning is to praise God, in whatever form that may take. Verse 1 speaks of

singing a new song. It is good to write “new” songs, but it is also possible to sing an old song with new conviction; this shows that we are ever-growing and maturing spiritually. God has done great things and He continues to do so. The same song may take on new meaning based upon one’s Christian experience.

This psalm also makes clear that dancing is appropriate when we gather to praise God (v. 3). David danced before the Lord as the Ark of the Covenant was brought back to Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6:14-15). After the nation of Israel crossed the Red Sea Miriam and the other women grabbed their tambourines and praised God in the dance because He delivered them from the enemy (Exodus 15:20-21). In many African American churches today, there are active dance ministers who give God praise and offer worship to God through use of the body.

In verse 4 it says that “God takes pleasure in his people,” therefore we should take pleasure in Him. He rules by love which makes Him worthy of praise, and He loves to be in communion with us.

The Worship and Arts Ministry of the church has a unique and important role. It includes providing music, singing, dance, and other forms of worship. Week in and week out, the members of this ministry labor long and unceasingly in households of faith around the country. Typically, those who lead these ministries are not paid enormous salaries and often singers, dancers, and mime participants are not paid at all. But they still show up prepared and proud to participate in church services designed to uplift people and most importantly point people to the God who desires their uplift, obedience, and praise. Ultimately, the job and aim of the Worship and Arts Ministry is to offer praise to God and to establish an atmosphere in which others are moved to give true praise to God. Thanks be to God for those who take us into the presence of the Presence.

Celebration

The word “hallelujah” comes from two Hebrew terms: (1) *Hallah*, which means to boast or celebrate; and (2) *Jah*, which is the short name for God (Jehovah). Therefore, when we say “Hallelujah!” what we are really saying is, “God, I celebrate You.” We have much to celebrate on Worship and Arts Sunday. We celebrate those who labor in this ministry in our churches. And we praise God for his faithfulness in giving us such devoted servants. For this reason, and just because God is who he is, we shall dance before the Lord, play instruments to honor Him, and sing new songs or old songs that have taken on a new meaning because of what God has done for us. We will praise the Lord with all of our hearts, our minds, and our entire being.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of these passages include:

Sounds: New songs being sung; instruments being played; shouting (Psalm 20:5; Psalm 33:2-3; Psalm 149:1); and

Sights: Dancing (Psalm 149:3).

III. Other Material That Preachers and Others Can Use

In the hands of God, any form of worship or praise becomes lethal to the purposes of satan. At Jericho, God used the sounds of trumpets and a single great shout from His people to reconfigure the molecular makeup of Jericho's massive walls and totally collapse them to the ground so that every Israelite soldier was able to walk straight into that fortified city.

—Joseph L. Garlington, *Worship: The Pattern of Things in Heaven* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image Publishers, 1997), 70

The worship experience must begin with an affair of the heart. It does not consist of outward forms, rituals, and ceremonies as the Samaritans and others perceived worship. Music is a link that brings the atmosphere of God's presence into focus. The tendency to equate music totally with worship is a common mistake. God also may be worshiped in silence, in quietness and reflection. God's presence comes when we surrender. Surrendering to the Holy Spirit allows our yielded Spirits to move to new levels of awareness.

—Jerome E. McNeil, *The Pain of Change: Transitioning a Church Through Worship and Prayer* (Grand Prairie, TX: Queen V Publishing, 2006), 43–44

There are doors being forced open for you just because you are a worshiper. God is looking for people who will worship Him in spirit and in truth, those who are not afraid to meet Him face-to-face.

—Neil C. Ellis, *Pursuing the Glory* (Mitchellville, MD: Pneuma Life Publishing, 2010), 166

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