

Wisdom for a New School Year

15 August 2021

I think most of us are familiar with the phrase “Go Big or Go Home.” For better or worse, that tends to be how my life gets lived. I can have this tendency to jump all in ready to go on something I’m passionate about and tackle more than one thing at a time. Some of you know that about me, I do things like build a house while living in a camper while in graduate school. Why, well, why not? That’s how we ended up with a Psalm as our scripture for the sermon today.

As many of you know, I graduated from seminary at Perkins this past May, and as a part of my seminary internship last school year, Dr. Mosser encouraged me to preach online this spring, and has continued to encourage me to preach on occasion as I grow in my role as a prospective deacon. This is my first ever sermon in front of more than just a few people, so of course God laid the Psalm for this week on my heart as the Scripture to focus on today. If you think back on it, you’ll realize that we haven’t heard a sermon on a Psalm in quite a long time. They just aren’t something we hear sermons about very often. So... here we go, first ever sermon in person and the first sermon I’ve heard preached on a Psalm in a very long time. So, join me in “going big” just a few minutes and then we’ll all “go home.” I invite you to stand as I read our Scripture aloud for today:

Praise the LORD. I will extol the LORD with all my heart in the council of the upright and in the assembly. Great are the works of the LORD; they are pondered by all who delight in them. Glorious and majestic are his deeds, and his righteousness endures forever. He has caused his wonders to be remembered; the LORD is gracious and compassionate. He provides food for those who fear him; he remembers his covenant forever. He has shown his people the power of his works, giving them the lands of other nations. The

works of his hands are faithful and just; all his precepts are trustworthy. They are established for ever and ever, enacted in faithfulness and uprightness. He provided redemption for his people; he ordained his covenant forever— holy and awesome is his name. The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow his precepts have good understanding. To him belongs eternal praise. – Psalm 111

So, why this Psalm on this particular Sunday when we have blessed those heading back into schools and classrooms? There are just a few precious days of summer break left for our children, and the anxieties, intensity, and excitement of the new school year have begun or will begin very soon. Many of us have been or are in the midst of all of these thoughts, feelings, and activity. Except for the youngest among us, we've all been a student, I know many of us are teachers, principals, professors, or school support staff, and many of us are parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents. We know well these feelings, and our Psalm today addresses some of them.

Beyond being a beautiful poem honoring God, this Psalm offers some practical reminders for those of us who worship God. Our faith should be personal but isn't really meant to be private.¹ We must each have our own robust faith lives, and we should continually work to develop and deepen our relationship with our Creator. But our faith should not ever stay between us and God.

The Christian understanding of faith is always understood in the corporate as well as the personal. Christians have from the beginning understood that faith in God is personal, but also communal. That is the reason why we gather together in any way we can to worship God and participate in communion. This past year and a half plus has shown us how vital we are to each

¹ Reflections from the New Interpreter's Commentary.

other in the practice of our faith, though it has also required some creativity to have community safely.

Humans were not created to have a private faith. God has always expected us to have a faith that is lived out in a community. We live our faith together: in our families, in our classrooms, in our community, state, country, and world. A lived-out faith is one that is meant to be expressed in our words and our actions. We must always “practice what we preach,” meaning our personal understanding of faith is to be lived out to the best of our ability in our community, both local and global. The Psalms give us examples of what that might look like.

The Psalms as a personal and corporate act of devotion to God have a long history in both Jewish and Christian faith. During the time of Jesus, the Jewish temple used various Psalms in their worship of God. They were read or sung by individuals or the whole group depending on the Psalm. Which Psalms were used in worship depended on the Jewish liturgical calendar and many were chosen to be read because their topic fit with whatever holy day or feast was being celebrated or remembered.² Jesus and his followers were familiar with the Psalms as useful in worship, and could have also have read, sung, or prayed them on their own apart from the Temple.

St. Benedict, an early Catholic monk living and writing in an Italian monastery in the 500's, believed that the Psalms should be sung by the Benedictine monks on a weekly basis. That's the whole book of Psalms being read/sung once each week.³ They would do this together during their multiple times a day worship. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran living and writing in

² Fred Gaiser, enterthebible.org “Old Testament: Psalms” May 25,2021.

³ *The Rule of St. Benedict*, Chapter 18, “The Order of the Psalmody.”

Germany in the 1930's and 40's, encouraged his seminary students to read the Psalms daily as well. He believed that they should be read during family devotions each day and during times of corporate worship.⁴ People from various denominations across the world have used the Psalms in their personal devotions, their family devotions, and in their communal times of worship for thousands of years. The praises, laments, prayers, and cries found in the Psalms have had importance and meaning for humans throughout that time.

So, people who follow Jesus have a long understanding of reading of the Psalms in our home devotions and in our larger group gatherings. Why, beyond tradition, would we read them today? What wisdom or benefit do they offer us? Bonhoeffer believed and pointed out to those same seminary students that somewhere in the world, some follower of Jesus was praying to God the same way that any Psalm he might choose to read was written. So, what if we thought of the Psalms as a way to understand the human experience, including the experiences of people vastly different from ourselves but sharing the same faith that we do, in this beautiful and broken world. And what if we also thought about them as a way to express our relationship with God, as a way to express our prayers and worship to God, both personally, in our own homes, and when we gather together in worship.

When we read the Psalms, we see many of the human emotions and experiences we have today, no matter our age, occupation, or life experiences. We can take comfort and find inspiration in that today, in our world that frequently believes it is living in "unprecedented" times. Our God, who both created humans and came to earth and lived a human life, can understand and handle any feeling or experience we encounter.

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Life Together," 44-50.

In that frame of mind, we can read this Scripture this morning before school starts as a personal act of worship- a way to express our personal beliefs in this wonderful, awesome God we serve to the entire congregation. This scripture reminds us straight out of the gate that our faith is to be a public faith. The former elementary educator in me absolutely loves that this Psalm is an acrostic poem, with each line beginning with the next consecutive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. How better to start a new school year that publicly declaring our faith in God in the form of an acrostic poem?

Psalm 111 mentions the fear of the Lord more than once. Modern audiences hear the word fear and automatically have a negative connotation. We sometimes want to skip over that word or ignore it because to us, fear implies being afraid of God. But I'm asking you to take a moment, face your fear (ha), and consider that word. Our God is indeed mighty, and the Psalmist recounts some of the ways that God is awesome: God has created everything and remembered and rescued the Israelites from Egypt. God provided food for them in the desert and gave them a nation. And even when they were carried into exile, God cared for them still, and was with them when they returned to their homeland.

This doesn't sound like the writing of someone who was afraid the way we would understand the word fear. The word used here implies an acknowledgement that God is awesome, and a reverence of God. This Psalm isn't about our understanding of fear- it is about acknowledging how God has cared for his people in the past and in the present. The Psalmist writes that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. So, it is not being afraid of God that leads to wisdom, but instead it is the reverence of God that leads to wisdom.

The start of a new school year also marks a continuance in our seeking for knowledge and wisdom. Students enter classrooms to learn knowledge, but often learn some wisdom through their experiences as well. Teachers, staff, and parents learn new knowledge and acquire some wisdom as well during the school year. You might not think it, but you do: where is drop off this year? What does the newest research say about how to reach students best? How do I work with this child to help them learn successfully? What do I need to share with my child so they will be successful with their peers and in the classroom this year?

This Psalm reminds us that wisdom won't to be found in acquiring all the earthly knowledge we can, much to this nerdy scholar-at-hearts chagrin. Our own thoughts, feelings, and experiences also do not create real wisdom according to the Psalm. What this psalm reminds us is that real wisdom is not found in experiences or books, but in God. Knowing a lot is great (whew am I glad to know that!), and our experiences and feelings can add to our knowledge and wisdom, but to have real wisdom, we must embrace God's commitments and God's values. Where might we find what those commitments and values might be? In the person of Jesus Christ.

Jesus is the living Word, God in a human body. We see God's commitments and values when we look at the life of Jesus. So, when we are seeking how to have Godly wisdom, we should look what the Bible tells us about how Jesus lived his life. I encourage each of you to read closely the accounts of Jesus' life found in the Gospels. Ask questions, lots of them. Jesus did. Love others as you do yourself. Make friends and have real meaningful relationships with the outcasts, the unpopular, the strangers, those who look or believe differently from you. Love God as much as your body and mind can possibly manage. Be as generous as you can possibly

stand with you time, your energy, and your worldly goods. If you feel a little uncomfortable, if you aren't the most popular, and it's because you are seeking Godly wisdom by following the example of Jesus, then you are doing something right.

As we go out to start a new school year, let me offer you the following challenges: 1. Read and pray the Psalms, on your own or with your family. It will change the way you pray, the way you look at your neighbor, and the way you look at God. 2. Remember, there is nothing wrong or bad with learning all we can, and human experiences do shape our understanding of the world. However, we must view all of these through the lens of true wisdom. This scripture says that wisdom looks like righteousness, which is God's justice, grace, and mercy. 3. Seek Godly wisdom by seeking to imitate Christ. It can feel scary, but God promises to be with us no matter what. You won't be alone. You'll have God, and you will have the support of this congregation of Jesus followers to pray with and for you and to encourage and love you. Thanks be to God for a personal faith that is lived out with love and support from our fellow believers.