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Covenant Presbyterian Church
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What Does Praise Look Like?

Psalm 24

I'd like to start off this morning with a little congregational participation. I'm going to ask you a question and give you a moment to think about your answer and then see if there are a few people willing to share. The question is what is the most awe-inspiring, breath-taking, profound experience of nature you've ever had. You've likely had more than one, so just what comes to mind first.

(wait)

I'll go first. Up in the UP during the fall, there is a mountain you can go up (ok, big hill) where you can look out at all the trees below as their leaves change colors. One time when we went up, all the trees below us were gold and we were there just at the time of day when the light makes everything even more gold. It was like looking down on a golden valley.

(Anyone else willing to share? Take answers)

These moments of breath-taking, awe-inspiring experiences of creation help me to imagine what scripture means when it talks about creation praising God. Here are just a few examples:

The book of Revelation says: "and I heard every creature in heaven and earth and under the sea and in the sea, and all that is in them saying, "to him who sits on the throne and to the lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever." Or Psalm 19 says, "the heavens declare the glory of God and the sky above proclaims God's handiwork." Psalm 66 says, "all the earth worships you and sings praises to you." The book of Job says, "but ask the beasts, and they will teach you; the birds of the heavens, and they will tell you; or the bushes of the earth, and they will teach you and the fish of the sea will declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this?"

And scripture isn't the only place we find references to nature praising God. Poet Mary Oliver put her experience of it this way:

*When I am among the trees,
especially the willows and the honey locust,
equally the beech, the oaks and the pines,*

*they give off such hints of gladness.
I would almost say that they save me, and daily.*

*I am so distant from the hope of myself,
in which I have goodness, and discernment,
and never hurry through the world
but walk slowly, and bow often.*

*Around me the trees stir in their leaves
and call out, "Stay awhile."
The light flows from their branches.*

*And they call again, "It's simple," they say,
"and you too have come
into the world to do this, to go easy, to be filled
with light, and to shine."*

Can you picture it? Can you picture nature praising God? Each sunrise and sunset, each bud of a flower, each newborn creature, each star twinkling, each wave touching the shore, each snowflake falling, each mountaintop reaching to the sky? If we pay attention, we can see how all of creation finds ways to praise God. Like Jesus said, if we don't praise God, the rocks will cry out.

Praise is vitally important to life. One commentary says that Psalm 104's central motif is, "That creatures are made not only to survive but also to enjoy life... God delights in the creation, and we, the created, delight in this world and in the God who made it. The world is made from joy and for joy... There is joy at the foundation of the earth, in the dew on the grass, in the romping of a dog, in the quiet of cricket song on a summer night. There is joy in the wondrous interdependence of God's creatures, in the necessity in which we exist for one another. ... For this joy, we offer God our joyous praise."

So if nature has so many diverse ways to express its praise, how should we praise God? What does our praise look like?

For humans, the basic definition of praise is to offer an expression of approval or admiration. But to truly admire something, we have to first see it, observe it, notice it.

In her poem, "Foolishness? No, It's Not" Mary Oliver says,

"Sometimes I spend all day trying to count the leaves on a single tree. To do this I have to climb branch by branch and write down the numbers in a little book. So I suppose, from

their point of view, it's reasonable that my friends say: what foolishness! She's got her head in the clouds again.

But it's not. Of course I have to give up, but by then I'm half crazy with the wonder of it — the abundance of the leaves, the quietness of the branches, the hopelessness of my effort. And I am in that delicious and important place, roaring with laughter, full of earth-praise.”

When I first read that, I thought, sure, but who has a whole day to spend counting leaves? Our lives are busy and full. We are often in the same familiar places so we get into a routine and a rut. We are paying attention to our phones, or our TV's, or a book, which can be fine, but rarely do they elicit praise. So, while I may not spend the whole day at it, Mary Oliver shares with us an important wisdom of how noticing and admiring is a spiritual discipline which leads to praise. It is something we need to seek out intentionally and do on purpose.

Brian, Evie and I have been volunteering at the Eco Justice Center for around 8 years. Every Wednesday, no matter the weather, we drive up early in the morning to do the animal chores for the Center's chicken, geese, goats and alpacas. For a long time, my job has been the alpacas. I go to their pen and I muck out the stalls, replace the water and the hay and give them a treat. If I'm honest, sometimes I am not really in the mood. Sometimes I'm cranky because it is particularly cold or rainy or I'm tired. Some weeks, I feel annoyed because the alpacas, who are skittish creatures, but very interested in the treats I have for them, get in the way and make things difficult. Sometimes the goose ruins my mood, because she has imprinted on my husband, and while I can hardly blame her, it is no fun to be chased away from Brian and occasionally pecked. And sometimes I'm in a fine mood, but because we've been going there for so long and it is a familiar place where I can just get right into a rhythm, I end up going about the morning without paying much attention.

But, when I make a point of noticing, observing, what is happening that particular day in that particular place, I always find things to admire and praise. Every time I make a point of really looking, there is something that can make me stop and just stare in admiration for a while. Perhaps it is the different colors of the alpaca wool or the newly budding flowers or the snowflakes falling slowly over the field or the clouds in the sky or the birds singing in the trees. If I make a point of looking, there is always something worthy of praise. And of course, this can also happen in my backyard or on a walk by the lake or in a myriad of other times and places. But to develop a practice of praise we have to be intentional about looking. Of course sometimes nature will just up and hit us in the face with its beauty and miracles, but if we only wait for those moments we won't really develop a practice of praise.

But praise isn't just noticing. Once we've noticed something, praise invites us to find some kind of way to express our admiration and thanks for what we've noticed. You might have noticed how hard it is to communicate these moments in words when I asked you to think of something earlier. In many ways, nature is a great example of a picture being worth a thousand words. And some of you might practice your praise through art – painting, drawing, taking pictures. Imitation is a form of flattery which is something akin to praise. The challenge of finding the right words for praise is the inspiration for plenty of poetry. And it is certainly why we find ourselves drawn to the work of poets like Mary Oliver. But there is something really worthwhile in trying to articulate our praise. When we work to describe our experiences in an expression of praise, we grow our vocabulary and our imagination for praise.

Praise does something to our hearts and minds and souls. It transforms us into people who can see more and more of the beauty and mystery and joy of the world. Praise helps us to be regularly inspired and surprised by the world around us. It staves off apathy and despair. It reminds us that we are part of something larger than ourselves. It expands our view of the world.

And this is important in and of itself, but there is something even more that comes from a practice of praise. When we start with praise, we find ourselves invested in the world around us in new ways. When we take time to notice and give words to something in praise, what often follows is the desire to care for, protect, encourage and honor whatever we've found worthy of our praise. Praise ropes us in and gets us to look closer. Praise reminds us of our place as guests in this beautiful earth, but also reminds us of our call to be caretakers and stewards of all God has entrusted us with. I'm encouraging you to start with parts of nature, because it is one of the easiest places to start, but the more practiced we become at praise, the more we find ourselves able to find things worthy of praise in other kinds of places, other people, and even ourselves.

If we just spend our days reading all the ways the world is ending; if we just focus on all that has gone wrong and is going wrong; if we just see the enormity of the problems of caring for the earth, it is almost impossible to not end up paralyzed by either apathy or despair. The problems we face are way too big for any one of us. But, if we start with praise, if we constantly ground ourselves in all that is beautiful and mysterious and worthy and joyful, then our eyes end up open to the things we can do and the differences we can make. Praise leads us to ask important questions about how we want to spend our time.

In perhaps her most famous poem, Mary Oliver writes:
Who made the world?

*Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean—
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down—
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?*

If praise leads us to just ask that last question: what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life? It is time well spent. A practice of praise is one of the best ways to avoid becoming people weighed down by apathy and despair. Because each of these is contagious – apathy, despair and praise, and as people of faith, what do we want people to catch from us?

I hope this year, as we celebrate Earth Day, you'll feel inspired to intentionally grow a practice of praise - noticing things worthy of praise, expressing your praise in words and allowing praise to draw you into new ways of caretaking and loving the earth and all that is in it.