

Finding the Groove
Rev. Matt Landry
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SCRIPTURE READING

Psalm 150.

Praise the Lord. Praise God in his sanctuary;
praise him in his mighty heavens.

² Praise him for his acts of power;
praise him for his surpassing greatness.

³ Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet,
praise him with the harp and lyre,

⁴ praise him with timbrel and dancing,
praise him with the strings and pipe,

⁵ praise him with the clash of cymbals,
praise him with resounding cymbals.

⁶ Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Praise the Lord.

We have a picture in our home on the mantle of a young man and woman serving in New Orleans in the winter of 2005. It was my very first picture with the person who would become my wife. Every year during the season between Epiphany and Lent, known as Carnival, we decorate the picture with some green, gold, and purple beads and other nods to the celebration of Mardi Gras. New Orleans holds a special place in our hearts. Just months after Hurricane Katrina caused unbelievable damage up and down the Gulf Coast, Candace and I found ourselves working alongside each other in New Orleans as missionaries. We didn't know each other at the time, so in the midst of mission work, our lives were brought together, forever changed.

One of the hallmarks of New Orleans is the celebration of Mardi Gras. While I wouldn't recommend every facet of this holiday, it actually has roots in faith. Mardi Gras, or Fat Tuesday, is the day before Ash Wednesday when Lent begins. It's the feasting before the fasting. The celebration of Mardi Gras has its roots in medieval Europe and was made a legal holiday in Louisiana in 1875.

Again, many of the characteristics of Mardi Gras have its roots in faith. King's Cake, with the tiny baby in it, represents the finding of baby Jesus on Epiphany by the wise men. Father Owen Campion wrote that "by old, old custom, the cake cannot be a loaf. It must be baked as a round circle, 360 degrees, no breaks, no deviations in shape. It all signifies the eternity and perfection of God. Icing must cover the cake, in the bright colors of purple, green and gold, as if the frosting is a royal mantle. It is. Inside the cake is placed a small figurine or image of a baby, Jesus, the king." The beads that are tossed in the French Quarter represent royal colors- purple for royalty and justice, gold for power, and green for faith. I have heard that the beads represented the gifts of the wise men, purple stands for myrrh, green is for frankincense and gold is for gold. The original intent was to toss the color to the person who exhibited the color's meaning. I know, the meaning has been lost, a lot.

And what else is there? Of course, there's Dixieland jazz. This is an essential feature for any Mardi Gras, Fat Tuesday, or Shrove Tuesday celebration. While I realize a lot of the celebration of Mardi Gras is now more of a secular party, what this celebration reminds me of is to celebrate the seasons from Advent to Christmas, in this case Epiphany to Lent, and Easter to Pentecost. There's nothing like grand floats, traditional food, and great music, especially jazz, to mark the seasons.

Why jazz this morning? There are references to faith in many aspects of jazz. In his song, "Come Sunday", Duke Ellington wrote, "I believe God is now, was then and always will be." The Preservation Hall Jazz Band of New Orleans offered many hymns as a part of their repertoire. One of my favorite jazz albums of all time is John Coltrane's *A Love Supreme* recorded in December 1964. In a NPR story from 2012, we learn of the personal significance that this album had on Coltrane. "In the spring of 1957, his dependence on heroin and alcohol lost him one of the best jobs in jazz. He was playing sax and touring with Miles Davis' popular group when he became unreliable and strung out. Soon after, Coltrane resolved to clean up his act. He would later write, in the 1964 notes to *A Love Supreme*, "In the year of 1957, I experienced, by the grace of God, a spiritual awakening, which was to lead me to a richer, fuller, more productive life. It is truly a love supreme." There are references to faith throughout the genre of jazz.

In an article by Carolyn Pirtle from Notre Dame's Center for Liturgy, she speaks to this nature of jazz. "To begin with, this music is shot through with the message of the Gospel. [They] speak of the journey of faith that one makes throughout life, of the divine grace that helps one persevere on that journey in times of difficulty, and of the final journey that everyone must make through death to eternal life. New Orleans jazz provides an unapologetically raw yet overwhelmingly rich accompaniment for this journey. According to the trumpet player for the Preservation Hall Quintet, "In New Orleans, we bury our dead with jazz"—jazz that lifts up and transfigures the sorrows of death into a foretaste of the joys of eternal life, the joys of being alive in God."

Did you hear what she wrote? "Jazz provides an unapologetically raw yet overwhelmingly rich accompaniment for this journey." Doesn't that sound like the psalms? The psalms are probably my favorite part of the Bible. They are authentic and raw, full of emotion. That's why I'm looking forward to starting a sermon series and a Lenten prayer series on the Psalms starting next week. What we learn from studying the psalms is that they are a school of prayer, a song book, teaching us how to pray. They give us a glimpse of the soul of God's people who were real people, full of emotions just like us. They were angry and peaceful, sad and joyful, full of great fear and great faith. They can teach us how to pray.

In our psalm reading this morning, we end the entire Psalter, the 150 psalms, with a psalm of praise. Psalm 150 is a call to praise. Dr. Walter Bruggemann in his book *The Message of the Psalms*, wrote about Psalm 150, "The conclusion of the Psalter is this extravagant summons to praise, which seeks to mobilize all creation with a spontaneous and unreserved act of adoration, praise, gratitude, and awe."

There is even a where, why, how, and who in this psalm. Where do we praise God? Look at verse 1. We praise God in the sanctuary and in the mighty heavens. As someone said in our Monday morning Bible study this week, "We praise indoors and outdoors." Why do we praise? Look at verse 2. We praise God for God's acts of power and surpassing greatness. How do we praise

God? In the psalm, the writer strikes up the band in verses 3 to 5. In the call to praise God, the entire orchestra is present; the wind, string, and percussion sections are there. There is dancing and everything that has breath, offers praise. This expresses the diversity of praise on earth. Finally, who is to praise God? Look at verse 6. "Let everything that has breath praise the Lord." Everyone and everything with breath is to praise.

We pray our praise, we sing our praise, we shout our praise to God. Psalm 150 brings to mind "Hallelujah." It's a word that literally means praise. "Hallelu" means "give praise," and the last part is a form of the sacred name "Yahweh." This Psalm is a call to praise, to celebrate who God is, God's mighty deeds and surpassing greatness. It is a call to be "wow'ed" by God again! Have you ever been to an impressive parade? I'm thinking like Thanksgiving Day in New York City, or Rio during Carnival, which means "farewell to flesh", or maybe Mardi Gras in New Orleans. They are meant to wow the audience. The floats, the color, the dancing, the music; it's all meant to put a rhythm and energy into us. If we're not just impressed by the sheer jubilation and celebration of it, then we're also invited and pulled into it. What if God wants our lives to be filled with the revelry and celebration and dancing of a Mardi Gras parade?

I love this article on Mardi Gras by Morgan Guyton who is a pastor and co-director of the United Methodist campus ministry of Tulane and Loyola University in New Orleans, who wrote, "If you look at Psalm 150 through Mardi Gras-colored glasses, it's no longer the recitation of obligatory correct speech about God, but the manic revelry of a celebration that the Holy Spirit has thrown into utter chaos." To praise someone or something is to commend, express admiration for, applaud, admire, and celebrate. This psalm is a call to celebration.

In church, for whatever reason, we don't take enough time to celebrate what God is doing in our midst. There are times when we need to "Be still and know" as the psalmist says in Psalm 46, yet there are other times for pure jubilation and celebration of what God has done, is doing, and will do in our lives. How do we live a life of celebration or praise for God? Do we walk around with instruments like the psalmist says? Do we wear beads?

For me, living a life of praise can be summed up in Romans 12, this is from the Message, "So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering." Take every facet of your life and offer it to God. In your work, in your eating, in your listening to jazz, in your everyday life, make time for God, be aware of God, and celebrate the God who walks with you.

One of the most interesting parts of Psalm 150 is that it is an unfinished psalm of praise. Sr. Irene Nowell, who is a Benedictine sister, wrote the book *Pleading, Cursing, Praising: Conversing with God through Psalms*. "Psalm 150 is unfinished – it has only the call to praise but no reasons. Thus the Psalter itself is unfinished." I would add that the psalm gives two reasons to praise that are not personal though, praise God for God's mighty deeds and surpassing greatness. We are meant to praise God in a personal way, specific to our everyday lives. Sister continues, "We are left to finish the doxology, to give the reasons for praise, with our lives. Even through eternity we will not be finished with praise of our wonderful God. Praise is the goal of all prayer. All of our prayer reaches for Hallelujah."

This psalm is left unfinished. There's room for you and me to join the chorus of praise with our lives. Just like a good jazz song, it's time for your solo! Celebrate someone else this week. Celebrate what God has done and is doing in your life. Celebrate what God will do during the season of Lent to resurrection! May we give praise with the rhythm of jazz! May we give praise with the rhythm of our breaths and heartbeats! May we give praise with our lives!

Let's pray: Holy One, we celebrate that where people are gathered together in love: You are present and life is full. Help us to celebrate this week what you have done, are doing, and will do in our lives and in this upcoming season of Lent. Our desire is to praise you with our lives, every part of our lives. We praise you with jazz, with song, with voice, with hearts raised high to you all in the name of Jesus the Christ our Lord. Amen.