

“Celebrating God’s Presence in Each Moment”
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
Part of the “Blessings” Worship Series
Edina Morningside Community Church; July 26, 2017

Psalm 113

*Praise the Lord! Praise, O servants of the Lord; praise the name of the Lord.
Blessed be the name of the Lord from this time on and forevermore.
From the rising of the sun to its setting the name of the Lord is to be praised.
The Lord is high above all nations, and his glory above the heavens.
Who is like the Lord our God, who is seated on high,
who looks far down on the heavens and the earth?
He raises the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from the ash heap,
to make them sit with princes, with the princes of his people.
He gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children. Praise the Lord!*

Matthew 6:11

Give us this day our daily bread.

The Way It Is, by William Stafford

*There’s a thread you follow. It goes among
things that change. But it doesn’t change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it is hard for others to see.
While you hold it you can’t get lost.
Tragedies happen; people get hurt
or die; and you suffer and get old.
Nothing you do can stop time’s unfolding.
You don’t ever let go of the thread.*

I woke up this morning on the North Shore of Lake Superior. Javen and I have spent the last few days there with his parents, celebrating his dad’s birthday and retirement. It was a magical trip, filled with great food, leisure time, pleasant company and incredible scenery. Today as with the two previous mornings, I got to sit in stillness outside our cabin, warm coffee in hand, listening to quiet lapping water and birdsong as the majestic sun started its ascent from azure blue water into cloudless sky. On the North Shore, it’s only natural to gaze in wonder at the cosmos and say along with the psalmist: *From the rising of the sun to its setting the name of the Lord is to be praised.*

But the sun also rises in Saint Paul and Edina, right? Why don’t we have these same transcendent, praise-God experiences in our days back home? My days here are much more likely to start with a tired groan, slight resentment at trading the bed for the gym, and then preoccupation with all that needs to be done in a given day. Rather than “praising the name of the Lord” I’m filled with my to-do list and emotions, feeling hurt at slights from others, irritation with other drivers in traffic, plus cursing or hailing the news of the day. I know the importance of pausing to connect with God so I can usually find ten minutes for morning prayer, but I rarely get around to midday meditation until midafternoon (if at all), and I hardly ever make time for evening gratitude. Too often it feels like an interruption to slow down for spirituality; there’s just so much else to do! Are you better at praising God’s name from sunrise to sunset? If so, what’s your secret? I’d love to learn from somebody.

I'm guessing that few of us are very good at celebrating God's presence all the time, noticing blessings in each moment. The good news is that God is not so self-centered as to *need* our perpetual praise. The bad news is that Christians are little better than our secular neighbors at noticing God's activity in our everyday lives. Perhaps we tell ourselves that God only cares about the big, cosmic things, and doesn't really bother for the smaller, ordinary moments. God is so huge and cosmic that we shouldn't expect God to show up just any old time. Sometimes I wonder whether God is like a reluctant churchgoer who only shows up at the "big three" transitions of the faithful life: baptisms, weddings and funerals, or what I've heard called "hatch, match and dispatch".

Yet if we convince ourselves that God doesn't mind our daily moments, it changes how we show up to the day as well. Without recognition of God's presence, my schedules, ambitions, and to-do lists become idols that claim ultimate sway over the day. If we live in a constant, hurried oblivion we start to measure things not by how much they reflect God's priorities but how well they advance our own. We risk becoming blind to the ways that our actions harm the earth or others because what matters most is getting our own stuff done. We also miss chances to show up with compassion for neighbor and stranger, thereby coarsening our relationships and the world we live in. God may not need perpetual praise, but I'm starting to think that we could benefit from it.

So the psalmist says, *From the rising of the sun to its setting the name of the Lord is to be praised.* And Jesus gives us—in the Lord's Prayer—the words to say: "Give us this day our daily bread." It's an acknowledgement that each day—from sunrise to sunset and back around again—comes to us as a gift from God (even when the days are tough). The food we eat, the air we breathe, the water we drink—all this is "daily bread", and cause for giving thanks to God. William Stafford's writing puts this poetically as well: *"There's a thread you follow.... While you hold it you can't get lost.... Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding. You don't ever let go of the thread."* In other words, all the other things that fill our lives are transient—our ambitions, goals, health, anxieties, relationships and activities. God weaves through all of them, yet is not confined to them. Terrible and great things will happen in our lives and in the life of the world. Yet while we hold this thread and share the presence of God in one another, we can't get lost. *From the rising of the sun to its setting the name of the Lord is to be praised.*

Then praise God for this daily thread which connects and sustains us. Praise God in the most ordinary of times: before meals, in the shower, during meetings, while walking the dog, after phone calls, when assembling a puzzle, or any time at all! Let praising God be as natural as breathing in and breathing out, part of everyday life. It won't always come easily, so we seek out the places and habits that help. And when we catch the thread, perhaps we'll offer praise to God by the advice of another poet, [Mary Oliver](#), [who writes](#): "...just pay attention, then patch / a few words together and don't try / to make them elaborate, this isn't / a contest but the doorway / into thanks, and a silence in which / another voice may speak."

Then we can be present to ourselves and discovering God in "daily bread". Then we may have the strength and poise to speak our truth even when our knees quake. Then we may slow down enough to recognize the face of God in the other who suffers, and discern within ourselves the ability to respond with mercy. Because for all the great or lousy things that preoccupy our minds or fill the headlines, for all that those with power do or don't do, if we can let ourselves be guided by another Spirit into perpetual praise, we can be insulated from the seesawing fortunes of lesser gods. Our accomplishments, our schedules, our elected officials, and all the other idols—these are things that change. God works through (and despite) such changeable things, just as on the North Shore waves, frost and mossy plants break up giant rocks into pebbles, and then into rich soil for all. By the power of a divine thread which endures come what may, God still—perpetually—unceasingly—ever-presently: *"raises the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from the ash heap...gives the barren woman a home"* and causes joy in the raising of children. Therefore, praise the Lord! Amen.