

I was very young when I learned that my singing voice **did not** sound like I thought it sounded. I was probably 5-years old when my dad took me to see Walt Disney’s *The Jungle Book*. Afterwards he recorded me singing an exuberant rendition of “The Bear Necessities.” (“...and for the bear necessities/ the simple bear necessities/ forget about your worries and your strife...”) When my dad played the recording, and I heard how I actually sounded, I began to sing with a little less volume in church. As I got older, I sang **even more** quietly and self-consciously, unless I was by myself and sure no one would be harmed.

I still feel self-conscious when I sing. Some of that owing to the fact that my father was an accomplished musician, having played in the Chicago Symphony. But because I believe our God delights even in the heartfelt praise of those who sing poorly, I give it my best on Sunday mornings. (A Medal of Valor may be appropriate for those who serve as liturgists on Sundays!)

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So there I was – several years ago – at a week-long event at Princeton Seminary: *The Princeton Forums on Youth, Theology, and Culture*. Early in the week, during one of the twice daily worship services, something unexpected happened. I don’t recall the hymn, but I was suddenly aware – I knew, I just knew – that I was singing the hymn exactly as it was meant to be sung. I was hitting each and every note! My heart swelled because, for just a moment, I felt God was hearing me express my praise as beautifully as those who sing in our choir.

And yet, even as I began sang more boldly, there entered into my mind a sense of uncertainty, a giggling demonic whisper that said: “You are fooling yourself. Like that time when your dad recorded you. You may not sound like you think.” So, as I sang the third verse, I prayed that God might somehow confirm what I hoped was true; that I was signing beautifully...

As we finished the hymn and began to take our seats, a woman in the pew in front of me turned and said, “I hope I get to sit near you at the next worship. Your voice is wonderful.” Two other women who were with her nodded in agreement!

Can you imagine how that felt? What a gift that was? What sheer joy!

But please know, if it isn’t already clear: what I felt had nothing to do with pride or arrogance. My elation was due to an intense wonderment that I’d been given a chance to offer – just once – a pleasing and unrestrained offering of praise to the God who made me. And then, in answer to prayer – isn’t God is so good? – to have others turn and confirm that my voice, my singing, had elevated their spirits.

The desire to offer heartfelt praise to God is the overarching theme of our reading from Psalm 8. And as we consider *The Power of Words*, Psalms like this one help us understand the importance of deepening our vocabulary of praise.

Psalm 8 is unique among all the writings of the First Testament because it is the only hymn in all of the Hebrew Scriptures that’s composed entirely as a direct address to God. From the very first note, the Psalmist pours out his unrestrained praise: “O YHWH, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!”

Because God’s name, “YHWH”, is to be revered above all else (too hallowed to be uttered by anyone who’s a mere creature) – the English translations of this Psalm follows the Jewish religious custom, substituting the word LORD, in all capital letters. Whenever we see that in the Bible – LORD in all capital letters – it indicates that God’s holy name, YHWH, actually belongs there. And so, before we look to anything else, it’s important that we notice that the Psalm ends with a reprise of the opening verse: “O YHWH, our Sovereign, how majestic is **your name** in all the earth!”

So then, Psalm 8 begins and ends with direct and uninhibited praise to God. The Psalmist has shaped this hymn to remind us that from the first to the last; from beginning to end, that our whole lives should be framed in praise to God. Indeed, every verse of this Psalm, except one, is addressed directly to God. “You have set...” “You have made...” “You have given...”

But notice – right in the middle – that the Psalmist refers to himself just once: “When I look at your heavens...” This is more obvious in

Hebrew, but that “I” is right in the middle of the Psalm. And if we locate ourselves there, knowing that we are in the center and surrounded, as it were, by God’s glory and grace, then we can feel what the Psalmist was feeling... and join in praising God who not only arranged the moon and the stars, but who is also mindful of us.

Anyone who has gazed at the starlit sky, or who’s watched the sun go to sleep beyond the ocean’s far horizon, or who has watched a newborn sleeping, or *even anyone who has overheard a child singing without self-conscious hesitation*... can relate to the awe and deep gratitude expressed in this Psalm. G.K.

Chesterton once remarked that the worst moment for an atheist is when he or she feels grateful and there’s no one to thank. People of faith have barrier to expressing gratitude. Meister Eckhardt, a medieval German mystic, once told his parish: “If the only prayer you say in your whole life is ‘thank you’ that would suffice.”

I don’t know about you, but I’ve not been overwhelmed of late by a sense gratitude. To the contrary, I’ve felt beleaguered. I feel both scared and scarred by the incivility that’s seeping into all areas of our societal discourse. On TV, on the radio, in the newspaper; on social media like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, there is a relentless barrage of raging antagonism which aims to tear down and abuse “them” or “the other” (whoever they may be). And that, in turn, fuels the persistent anxiety we feel that the world is coming apart and that there’s little that we can do about it... except buy a gun to protect us from ‘them’ when the apocalypse begins.

It seems to me that one of the crucial responses a church **can offer** in such a culture is a place where people can experience a community dedicated to, and steeped in, a language of praise and gratitude – the language that runs through Psalm 8. The tremendous power of praise is noted in v. 2 where even the babbling sounds of babes and infants has the power to “silence the enemy and the avenger.” Do you see that? Even the forces that oppose God fall silent at the unformed praise of a newborn! Praise is that powerful! Using a grammar of glory, vocabulary of praise, reorients us to out better selves.

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Am I silly to actually believe that a church on a mission to show people how to speak words of gratitude and praise to God and to each other will be a church filled to the gills? Is that too ridiculous to hope? Is it not tragic that such a church would be both radically counter-cultural and very different than many churches now are?

In Philippians 4:8, and this is one of two ‘life verses’ for me, the apostle Paul tells us that the church needs to be just such a place, where an attitude of praise counters the cultural forces that oppose our Christ-like God. Paul writes: “...whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and **if there is anything worthy of praise**, think about these things.”

By implication, Paul is saying that we should not (as our raging politicians and pundits do!) train our gaze upon whatever is unjust, whatever is impure, whatever is displeasing, whatever is deplorable, whatever is unworthy of praise... Don’t focus on these things! This does not mean sticking our heads in the sand; but it does mean that we are called to consciously retrain our gaze; to look away from what is so clearly unworthy of our attention.

In other letters Paul explicitly says that followers of Christ must put away gossip, and grumbling, and destructive speech because these styles of discourse – which dehumanize others – which treat others as if God has not “crowned them with honor and glory,” have no place in the faith community formed around Jesus.

This why Ephesians 4:29 is such a good theme verse for our series! I know many of you are using the card regularly, so let’s say together before concluding today’s message...

As the Swiss theologian, Hans Urs Von Balthasar tells us: “We need only to know who and what we really are to break into spontaneous praise and thanksgiving.” I pray that St. Paul’s will become famous as being a church always ready to help people discover who and what all of us really are... made in the image of a loving God and “crowned with honor and glory.” Amen.