

"A Life of Praise" – Psalm 30 – May 5, 2019

Rev. Rachel A. Wann

One of the writers I follow is a woman named Rachel Held Evans. She is popular in progressive circles of Christianity, especially for those coming out of oppressive, fundamentalist Christian backgrounds, that, among other things, suppress women in leadership positions. Rachel writes a lot about the transition from that type of background, because, she experienced it herself. In finding her voice and standing up to patriarchal, racist, and homophobic religious systems, she has become a voice of hope for those seeking a way to break free and worship a God who favors the oppressed and seeks to break oppressive bonds. Tragically, Rachel died yesterday from what seems to be complications of infection that caused continual brain seizures. At 37 years old, she leaves behind a husband and two young children. Her unexpected death has brought shock and grief to her wide circles of friends and followers.

There are any number of ways that people react to hardships that come up in life. We may react with intense grief or anger. We may try to blame others for its cause. We may even attempt to sidestep the hardship, denying its existence and hiding behind a well-constructed emotional barrier. Or sometimes, we allow it to overwhelm us and control our lives, sending us into a downward spiral.

When they occur, many of us aren't prepared to handle the rough patches in life. Sometimes they take us off guard, popping up when least expected. Or maybe we see it coming, but we just don't know how to handle those bumps in the road. We fill ill-equipped to deal with tough times, and it doesn't take much to overwhelm us or knock us down to the point where we feel like we can't get up. Sometimes these trials affect ourselves, other times they happen to family or close friends, yet we find ourselves in the middle of the mess. How we handle the situations says a lot about our faith in God.

This morning the psalmist who penned Psalm 30 knew something about hardship and also something about faith. The writer had felt himself on the verge of death, but from this dark place, God has rescued him. He believes that all weeping is momentary, because we have the assurance that joy comes with the morning. While darkness may descend from time to time, we are assured that dawn will come.

The writer of psalm 30 looks back on his life. While the psalmist was riding on top of the world, tragedy struck. And suddenly when he went anxiously searching for God, God could not be found. God was silent, absent. And in that moment of trial and hardship, the pedestal

of worldly successes came crashing down, revealing the psalmist's ultimate and true need. The need not for material things. The need for a relationship with God.

The psalmist knew God, and so he cried out for God. He believed that God had the power to save him and bring him out of his deep illness. When times were rough, he knew he could not rely on his own strength, but needed God to help him. He even bargained with God – if I get through this tragedy, I'll make a change for the better. The psalmist recounts, that in his darkness he appealed to God's desire for the praise and devotion of humanity. Save me, and I will praise and thank you. If I die, who will praise you then?

God doesn't need our praise, per se. But we were created in order to praise God. When we look to the Confessions of the Presbyterian Church, the Westminster Shorter Catechism begins with the question, What is the chief end of man? The answer, Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. Human beings were created to love, worship and enjoy God. In the midst of his crisis, the psalmist recognizes this. And he realized that he hasn't been living up to it. During the good times, he relied on himself, forgetting to acknowledge that it was God who allowed him to prosper. And so in his trial, he comes clean and strikes the bargain. Honestly, the bargain is more for himself than it is for God. If I make it through, I am going to make a change in my life. I will put the focus, not on myself, but back on God. Now think about this – and this is the key point – if he really does it, if he really follows through with his promise to praise God, his life will take on a more joyful and peaceful quality.

The psalmist has discovered a profound truth. When we live our lives in praise to God, those dark situations that come to us are easier to face. They aren't any less weighty or painful, but our faith in God can help us face those times, because we know, we innately believe, deep down in our souls that the time of mourning is simply momentary, but joy and dancing will come with the dawn. Out of darkness will come light. Isn't that the message we celebrate at Easter? The tomb could not contain Christ. Death is not the last word.

This psalm reminds us to acknowledge each day the goodness of life that comes from God. When we take even a moment to notice and thank God for the good things we enjoy, then this attitude of praise will become a habit for us. Repetition makes habitual. We will begin to grow in this life of praise, seeing God's hand at work in the miracles of everyday life. In the beauty of nature and the arts, in the orderliness of the creation, in the smiles of the people around us, in the small acts of kindness and justice that we witness.

Perhaps you've seen athletes make the sign of the cross or gesture heavenward when they make a score or an especially good play. These small gestures are an ongoing reminder to them of the origin of their talent and skills. Sort of like, I know I scored this touchdown, but thank you God for giving me the strength and the athletic ability to perform. A simple thing, but an acknowledgment of thanks and praise to God. These simple acts, these little reminders, point us to God. Friends, when we can recognize God's hand at work in the little things, we will be comforted by God's presence when we face those big things.

One final word. When praising God becomes habit in our life, a natural part of our life of faith, facing the rough times does not have to be so rough, because we know that even in our grieving, God will be with us. Rachel Held Evans maintained an active online presence. Her last blog post, before her entrance into the hospital, was at the beginning of Lent. She wrote,

"It strikes me today that the liturgy of Ash Wednesday teaches something that nearly everyone can agree on. Whether you are part of a church or not, whether you believe today or you doubt, whether you are a Christian or an atheist or an agnostic or a so-called "none" ... you know this truth deep in your bones: 'Remember that you are dust and to dust you will return.'

Death is a part of life.

My prayer for you this season is that you make time to celebrate that reality, and to grieve that reality, and that you will know you are not alone.

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust." (<https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/lent-for-the-lamenting>)