

# RENEWAL OF PRAISE

A Sermon on Psalm 150—Rev. Adam E. Eckhart

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Any Judeo-Christian discussion of ‘what people are for’ has to contend with the Hebrew Bible’s wisdom literature: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon. Those books seem to have been written to answer the very question of what people are for. In my sermon series, I don’t have time to touch on all the major works of Hebrew wisdom, but in a couple weeks I’ll discuss Ecclesiastes and today we tackle the Psalms.

We already read from Psalm 17, when the writer cries out to God for justice. Psalm 150 is the final psalm, or holy song, in the collection, and it’s placed at the end for a reason. It’s the climactic pure praise of God. And yes, as a drummer I love the percussion references:

## **Psalm 150:1-6**

*Praise the LORD!*

*Praise God in his Sanctuary;*

*praise him in his mighty firmament!*

*Praise him for his mighty deeds;*

*praise him according to his surpassing greatness!*

*Praise him with trumpet sound:*

*praise him with lute and harp!*

*Praise him with tambourine and dance:*

*praise him with strings and pipe!*

*Praise him with clanging cymbals;*

*praise him with loud clashing cymbals!*

*Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!*

*Praise the LORD!*

May God add deep blessings to this reading of holy word. Amen.

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“I have promised and I reaffirm my promise to be your spouse.” With words like these, numerous couples over the years have renewed their marriage vows in front of me. Sometimes in the Sanctuary or Chapel, and sometimes in a lovely

part of God’s creation (no renewals on the beach yet). Usually the other attendees are limited to immediate family and closest friends. On two occasions it’s just been the couple, facing each other, promising to stay true to the covenant they first sealed 15, 20, 50 years ago.

Renewal of vow ceremonies are to me even more special than original weddings, both because they’re rarer and because it takes a different kind of hopefulness to renew your vows after you’ve lived into the richer or poorer, sickness and health, better or worse.

What does it take to promise your love and devotion when you’re 25 and you have so much future ahead of you and you’re so filled with romance? Then what does it take to renew that covenant when you’re older, you have hurt each other’s feelings numerous times, and a romantic night might mean folding laundry together?

Marriage is a covenant—a mutual promise with expectations of support and establishing a new family (even if the family is simply the couple). Above all, marriage like all covenants is based on trust.

A renewal of vows ceremony reaffirms the marriage covenant with eyes wide open to what can endanger that love and trust, those ‘worses’ that were more abstract on the first go around (in many ways, the same is true for second marriages, although with a different person who may help facilitate different betters and worses).

The more I read Psalm 150 and the writings of Walter Brueggemann, the more I see that last Psalm as a kind of renewal of vows with God.

Brueggemann is a retired UCC biblical scholar and pastor who’s written extensively on the shape of the Psalms as a whole (the entire collection is also known as the Psalter).

Brueggemann points out that within many psalms, there's three stages—first naivete, crisis, and second naivete. The psalm writer starts by remembering a time when things were good and they were innocent. Wow, I didn't know that much back then, they write. Next, the writer recalls a past crisis or describes a current one, and sometimes talks about it as being stuck in a pit—being wronged by an injustice, having a health crisis, a loved one dying, having one's reputation ruined.

Then the writer moves to a place of renewed hope either because the crisis has passed or they eagerly anticipate the crisis passing. Having experienced crisis, they have faith that God has saved or will save them from harm or despair, faith with their eyes wide open to what can befall them or anybody. And so they praise God, they proclaim God's ultimate goodness, as in Psalm 31 when the psalmist proclaims: "Blessed be the Lord, for he has wondrously shown his steadfast love to me when I was beset as a city under siege" (Ps. 31:21).

Brueggemann describes the praise of the Psalms as simultaneously being acts of self-abandonment and self-assertion.

Praise is saying, "God, you're awesome! You're the reason all this is here!"

"You created the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that fills it, the sand between our toes, the sun that grows the plants and warms us on the beach. You created Charles Island, the birds that nest there, the moon and the force of gravity that makes high tide and low tide so that people can walk out to Charles Island. You are responsible for all this! Praise the Lord!"

Praise is self-abandonment because in praise we forget our desire to be the center of attention. In praise we abandon any hope of looking respectable as we shout out to our invisible God with overflowing gratitude how we depend absolutely on God. In praise we admit that we are not the

authors of our own fate but rely on God's grace. In praise we abandon self-sufficiency and prudence.

And yet praise also allows us to assert ourselves to God.

When we praise God, we acknowledge that what we say to God somehow matters. How we experience life matters. Getting sucked down into the pit matters and being saved matters. Our lives matter.

A prime example of self-assertion comes in Psalm 139, verse 14: "I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works, that I know very well." It's like the psalm writer is saying. To see how awesome you've created the universe, God, look no further...than ME!

The more awesome God is the more awesome God's creatures are, and vice versa. By asserting the goodness of God, also asserts the goodness of our creation and the value of our lives.

Which is why the psalm writers say I'll praise you—as soon as you get me out of this crisis! Don't you forget about me!

People are for praising you, God! Now save me and let's get the praise going and fast!

One of the best points Brueggemann makes about Psalms and the life of faith is how the psalter allows people of faith to express disappointment of frustration with God even when our worship services don't often allow us to say, "God, you let me down. What's going on, God?"

Brueggemann suggests the psalms can teach us not only to confess our sins in worship but also to acknowledge our disappointment toward God, how there can be broken trust both ways in our covenant as God and God's people.

Praise allows us to abandon the fallacy that we have ultimate control over our lives but also allows us to assert our value in God's eyes, and the value of the covenant God has made with us.

What has God promised us, or covenanted with us? Well, in the United Church of Christ Statement of Faith, we pray to God:

“You promise to all who trust you,  
forgiveness of sins and fullness of grace,  
courage in the struggle for justice and peace,  
your presence in trial and rejoicing,  
and eternal life in your realm which has no end.”

God promises to forgive, to equip us with courage when our broken world makes life hard, to be with us when life is hard, and to offer us resurrection life.

God covenants if not always to be our wish-fulfiller, to be trustworthy to us; and we covenant to trust in God and to let that trust express itself when we can in self-abandoning and self-asserting praise. That is what people are for, partly, to experience God’s works and to give witness to them. Not that God needs praise, but God yearns to be in loving covenant with us just as we yearn to be in loving covenant with God.

Psalms 150 and the other psalms of straight-up praise cap a collection of psalms that express a full palette of emotions toward God. God and God’s people had been through a lot already back centuries before Christ. We continue to go through a lot in our lives of hope and disappointment, joy and despair.

At the end of the psalter, then, psalm 150 invites us to renew our vow of trust in God and our love for God’s creation, including ourselves, with our eyes wide open. In light of all the trials and rejoicing in life, the sin and the forgiveness, the wonder of creation and the freedom God grants us as creatures in creation, the psalm writer proclaims: “Praise the Lord! Praise him for his mighty deed, according to God’s surpassing greatness. Praise God with trumpets, tambourine and dance, with strings and pipes, all instruments of human creation praise the God who created us.

“Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!”

Unlike a couple renewing their vows, the relationship between God and God’s people is uneven. God grants us the fullness of life, we only covenant to trust in God and praise God. We cannot promise what God does; but neither can God promise what we can. We need each other for our covenant. And like a couple, both God and God’s people seek to look beyond the failures to the enduring love and trust. Most of us are no longer innocent that God will not give us what we want, nor answer our questions on our timeline. We have been through crisis or are in crisis now.

Yet the good news is that now, even in the midst of crisis, God is with us, reaffirms our covenant with us, and although we may be in a bad place now, will fulfill our ultimate trust. God has been present from days of old and through Jesus Christ in the upper room on the cross and risen from the dead. Like the disciples on that first Easter, we may be surprised by the ways that God grants us new life and salvation from pits of despair. We may not expect a new love in our life, a twist that brings vindication, or even peace in the midst of grief, and hope in the form of Christian faith in resurrection life.

May we renew our covenant with God; praise God; and remind God that we belong to each other. God is wonderful, worthy of praise, and by God’s grace, we are worth God’s works. Amen.