

# WORSHIP

Sermon | 12.30.2018



**Praise the Lord!**

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Psalm 148

Football is not a game that I enjoy. Even though I went to a college known for its great football teams—The University of Texas and have been known to attend a Super Bowl Party—football is not one of my favorite sports. Most of the rules and details for playing that game are a mystery.

For me, the best part of a football game is half-time when the marching band performs. But while this entertainment is going on, a very important part of the game is happening in the locker rooms. The players are taking a break from the game, refreshing themselves with water and Gatorade, and listening to their coaches. During Half-Time, coaches review the first half of the game with their players—what was done well, what was not done well, and the strengths and weaknesses of the opposing team. Then, the coaches discuss strategy for how to play the game in the second half. They prepare the team for how the game will be played to achieve their goal of winning.

So Half-Time serves an important function in a football game. It is a time of rest from their past performance and to plan plays for the future. Today, the Sunday between the end of the Season of Advent and the beginning of the Season of Lent, is a kind of Half-Time for the Church—a type of intermission in the liturgical calendar. Christmas Day is behind us and New Year's Day is in front of us. All of the excitement of Advent services, children's nativity plays and concerts, shopping for gifts, visiting our families and friends, and opening gifts under the Christmas tree, is finally behind us. Our houses are in happy disarray, we've said goodbye to house guests, and now we are in that lull before the next holiday in



the calendar. Christmas has been a time of focusing on our good fortune and blessings we have received--except for those special Christmas events and services at church which focus our thoughts on God—at least for a few minutes.

For many Christians, Christmas tends to be a holiday that emphasizes consumerism, fun and ourselves. Coming soon after Christmas, the next holiday on our calendar is New Year's Day. Traditionally, New Year's Day is a time for considering the past year and making resolutions about what we want to accomplish in the year to come. But today is the Sunday between Christmas and New Year's Day. After the whirlwind of the past month, on this Sunday, let's take a moment to refocus ourselves in this place of worship.

The Scripture text for today comes from the Book of Psalms. Psalms express the deepest yearnings of our hearts. There are Psalms of lament, joy, prayer, confession and remembering history. The expressions of the Psalms go beyond our own personal ones and express those of the community. The psalms bring us into the sanctuary of God and to a fuller knowledge of God. Psalm 148 is one of a group of psalms, which are referred to as the "Hallelujah" psalms, because they open and close with the exclamation, "Hallelujah!", which literally means in Hebrew, "Praise the Lord".

For us, today, on this Sunday between Christmas and New Year's, Psalm 148 is a particularly good text because it has one simple, profound message—the command to praise God. Praise God because God is the Creator of all. All of Creation is commanded to praise God.

This Psalm describes Creation as it was understood many centuries ago and it is a litany of commands to each part of Creation to praise God. The psalm begins with the acknowledgement that God created the heavens above the Earth. All heavenly beings and all of the heavens themselves are to praise God. God created the Earth and all creatures on it. The ground itself in the form of hills and valleys and all plants covering the Earth shall praise God.

Do you wonder how earth, animals and plants can praise God? Nature reflects God's glory and is a praise to God—In the majesty and grandeur of mountains in their height or the power of a hurricane in its howling winds and flooding waters. Sometimes, there is praise in small things. When I was in



college, I had a part-time job at a church and worked with a dear, sweet elderly woman named, Frances. One day, Frances came into the office beaming with joy and said, “I love pansies. They look like little happy faces smiling up at God.” When I see pansies, I think of Frances and of this humble little flower praising God.

God ended his creative activity in the Garden when He created humankind, and as we are told in Genesis, God conceived of us, designed us, and made us; all people of every kind across the face of the Earth—all people are called to praise God, their Creator. As we look at Creation and see that all of Creation praises, we should also understand that with all of our created selves, we should praise the Lord—with our whole hearts, and souls, and minds; with our thoughts and actions. We were created to be with God in the Garden and when we praise God we are fulfilling our destiny as creatures made in God’s image.

When we devote ourselves whole-heartedly in praise, it influences our actions, thoughts and beliefs. Praise changes us. Praise focuses our attention away from ourselves and toward God. All that divides people disappears when they stand before God in praise.

What are ways that we praise? We praise in song. We praise in prayer. We praise in speech. We praise when we treat others as creatures loved by God. We praise when we live our lives in accordance with God’s desires for us.

The inclusive language of this psalm calls all of creation and all of us—to praise our God.

The message of Psalm 148 is directed to all of creation. I suggest that the message of this psalm also encompasses all that we are as God’s people, the church.

Do we limit our praise to Sunday morning worship? Or should our praise be more than that? So how should we praise? Individually, we are to praise with all of our being—in all that we do, with all that we have, and with all that we are, we are called to praise the Lord!

But what if I don’t feel like giving praise? For many of us, this past year or season may have been difficult. There may be memories of pain or fear or loss. Praising God takes our focus away from ourselves and fills us with gratitude for



who God is. This can be hard, but even in the midst of trouble, we can still praise God. Praising God is not about how we feel. Praise is a choice. Praise is how we act. Praise is about what we know. Praise is our acknowledgement

that God is the Lord and that is why we praise God's name.

In Psalm 148, we are told that we should praise God because He has raised a "horn for his faithful people who are close to Him." This was a way of saying that God recognizes our faithfulness and God honors us. What a marvelous and joyful knowledge that is!

Psalm 148 reminds us that we are to offer praise to God. How wonderful it would be if all of humanity united with all of creation in praising God!

One of the greatest songs of praise in the Bible is recorded in the Gospel of Luke. When Mary learned that she would be the mother of the Messiah she sang praises to God for remembering Israel, for the history of God's covenants with Israel, and she proclaimed that God is worthy of praise.

For Christians, who know the redeeming power of Christ, we praise God for the grace that saves us from our sin and that brings us to closeness with God. We have just celebrated Christmas and the birth of our Messiah, we know of our salvation and fulfillment of God's promises to come. Like Mary, our praise to God should burst forth from us--praise in song and praise in deed.

In the aftermath of Hurricane Florence, the news coverage was filled with examples of praise. Christians praised the Lord when they opened churches as shelters for people displaced by the storm, when they rowed boats through neighborhoods helping rescue those trapped by rising water, when they delivered food to those who could not get to a grocery store, when they comforted strangers in their fear, and when they knelt in prayer in the yard of stranger, mourning the death of a mother and child.

As we begin the New Year, let us resolve to praise the Lord--at all times, and in all things. Let us remember that the Lord is our God, the Creator of Heaven and Earth who raises a horn for His faithful people. Israel knew that God deserved all praise and Israel knew how to praise God.



In our worship, we should follow the example of Ancient Israel by praising God through Psalms. But sometimes the language of the ancient texts of the Bible doesn't communicate to us in the 21st century in the same way. The language and images used in the Psalms are not as meaningful an exhortation to us as they were to the Israelites. Sometimes, our ears just don't hear the psalms as if we are the intended audience.

Following the pattern of Psalm 148, I have taken the liberty of writing a praise psalm, specifically for us, today, at this Half-Time between the seasons of Advent and Lent.

Halelujah!

Praise the Lord!

Let First Presbyterian Church of Charlotte praise the Lord!

Let the Pastors praise the Lord!

Let the Elders praise the Lord!

Let the Deacons praise the Lord!

Let the Church staff praise the Lord!

Let the adults, teens, and children praise the Lord!

Let us all praise the Lord!

Praise the Lord in our Church!

Praise the Lord in our worship services!

Praise the Lord in the music of the sanctuary, kirk and carrol choirs!

Praise the Lord in our Sunday School!

Praise the Lord in the Weekday School and the Day Care!

Praise the Lord in our Circles and Prayer Groups and Bible Studies!

Praise the Lord when our support groups meet to share the burdens of addiction or grief.

Praise the Lord in our Ministries to the hungry, the homeless, and the suffering!



Praise the Lord when volunteering with Loaves & Fishes.

Praise the Lord when being a host for Room in the Inn.

Praise the Lord when building a house with Habitat for Humanity.

Praise the Lord when visiting someone in the hospital.

Praise the Lord in our homes!

Praise the Lord when caring for our families and for each other.

Praise the Lord when offering hospitality to new church members.

Praise the Lord in our neighborhoods!

Praise the Lord by delivering a meal to a family grieving the death of a loved one.

Praise the Lord by giving aid to victims of Hurricanes along our coastline.

Praise the Lord while working construction in Mexico.

Praise the Lord at our jobs!

Praise the Lord when we work with integrity and kindness.

Praise the Lord in our schools!

Praise the Lord when we tutor at Westerly Hills Academy.

Praise the Lord as teachers when we inspire others to be their best and brightest selves.

Praise the Lord as students when we strive to learn and achieve to be active members of the community.

Praise the Lord with our friends and with strangers!

Praise the Lord when we welcome all people in the same way that Jesus welcomes us.

Praise the Lord in all that we say, in all that we do, in all that we think, and with all that we are!

Praise the Lord in wonder for His loving kindness!

Praise the Lord in gratitude for His glorious deeds!



Praise the Lord with exuberance for the Lord is our God!  
Our God is the Creator, the Sustainer and the Savior of us all!  
Hallelujah!  
Praise the Lord!

