

Seven Psalms #6: "Psalms to Keep Singing"
August 31, 2025

Psalm 146
Ephesians 5:15-19

This was yet another difficult week in a time of many difficult weeks.

The start of the school year brought hoax calls of shootings on the campuses of at least eleven colleges and universities, including at Iowa State.

The shooting at the Catholic school in Minneapolis was very real, very deadly, very tragic—and no one will do anything to prevent similar events in the future.

Our nation's entire public health system is under threat from the very people in charge of it.

We saw the spectacle of the President's cabinet fawning over him in a way that would seem excessive even in North Korea, even as he said this past week: "I have the right to do anything I want—I'm the President of the United States."

So it is that armed forces patrol our nation's capital, with plans in the works to send more troops to other cities, and I'm not the only one who sees our nation's slide toward authoritarianism.

In these difficult days, we come to worship this morning only to hear the Psalmist announce: "Praise the Lord!"

We listen as the Letter to the Ephesians encourages us to follow along, singing "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs among yourselves, sing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts."

This could sound like escapism at its worst, proof that religion is the "opiate of the people."

But bear with me, please. Listen closely. We might find here the path forward in these difficult days, offering us both the call and the courage that we need.

This is the sixth of seven Sunday on which we are listening closely to the Psalms. We're not done, but today we jump to the end. As the Book of Psalms comes to its conclusion, we discover once more what it is about: yes, this is a book of songs of praise.

Each of the last five Psalms begins with the same exhortation: "Praise the Lord!"

How good it is to sing praises to our God;
for God is gracious and a song of praise is fitting.

More and more of creation is called to this worship:

Praise God from the heavens...
Praise God, all the angels;
Praise God, all the hosts...
Sun and moon...all shining stars

It all continues to build:

Praise God with dancing...with tambourine

With trumpet sound, with lyre and harp
 With strings and pipe!
 With clanging cymbals, with loud crashing cymbals

Until the final words of those 150 songs shout for all to hear: “Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!”

For centuries, those in the church have joined in these Jewish songs of praise, taking the advice to “sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.”

This was the way of early Christians in difficult times. The Book of Acts tells of Paul and Silas, beaten and thrown into a dungeon, their feet secured in the stocks. And there they sat. Singing.

The singing continues into our own times. Two times while he was in jail in Birmingham, Martin Luther King, Jr. was given no food because he and others with him insisted on *singing* their grace to God at mealtime. Prison bars are not the limit of joy and hope.

In difficult, tumultuous times, we sing. Even now, in detention centers, immigrants sing in the face of injustice and deportation.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor who himself was imprisoned and ultimately executed for his part in the plot to kill Hitler said: “The more we sing, the more joy will we derive from it, but, above all, the more devotion and discipline and joy we put into our singing, the richer will be the blessing that will come to the whole life of the fellowship from singing together...all singing together that is right must serve to widen our spiritual horizon, make us see our little company as a member of the great Christian Church on earth, and help us willingly and gladly to join our singing, be it feeble or good, to the song of the Church.”

When we sing, we are united with each other, with the greater Church, and with all of suffering humanity. Our singing is both subversive and empowering. This is reason enough to sing, to sing loudly, to sing joyfully, to sing publicly.

Listen carefully, then, when the Psalmist tells us: Praise the Lord. Sing to God.

Listen, not only because the Psalmist is giving us a way forward but also because the Psalmist is clear that this is not just any god to whom we sing. We do not sing to a god of our imagination, or a god of our own making. We do not sing to a god who values some people more than others.

We sing to the God “who made heaven and earth, the sea; and all that is in them.” This is the God who is the ground of all being, the One who creates and sustains.

We sing to the Creator who is concerned about creation. This is the God, the Psalmist affirms:

who executes justice for the oppressed
 who gives food to the hungry
 who sets the prisoners free
 opens the eyes of the blind
 lifts up those who are bowed down
 watches over the strangers
 and upholds the orphans and the widows.

Your inner skeptic might respond to this with the awareness that God doesn't seem to be doing any of these things. From ancient Israel to the contemporary world, we still find the oppressed, the hungry, the imprisoned, the blind, those who are bowed down, strangers, orphans, and widows.

As I see it, the problem is not with God, but with us. The problem is that God chooses to act in the world through people like you and me.

This, of course, is also the opportunity.

From both the prophet Isaiah and Jesus we hear the call to go and do likewise, to show forth the image of God in each one of us by bringing good news to the oppressed, binding up the brokenhearted, proclaiming liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners.

Remember that lists such as we find in the Psalms and the Prophets are not meant to be exhaustive or exclusive. We need not limit ourselves to ancient good. We must seek the good that is needed today so that all might live in safety and freedom, prizing the rights and maintaining the liberties not just of ourselves but of all.

And this brings us to those surprising words from the Letter to the Ephesians: "Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people, but as wise, making the most of time, because the days are evil."

Two things are clear in these words. First, following in the way of Jesus Christ requires that we use the time we have to the best of our ability. We receive our life, our time, from God, and we should be guided by the wisdom that each day is of eternal value and eternal meaning.

Second, we are encouraged to make the most of time, not because everything is going so well and it's an opportune moment. We are encouraged to make the most of time—*because the days are evil*.

The unchecked assault on the environment; Unchecked greed; Unchecked religious fanaticism; Our time, like all times, is filled with threats, with dangers, and yes, with what we would call "evil."

Let me be clear and let us be honest with ourselves and with one another: these are not ordinary times with ordinary problems.

It feels that we are entering a vast wilderness with no Promised Land in sight.

In just such circumstances—in *these days*—we are called to live fully, doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God. Our task in these days is to give to God those works that might prosper—to create beauty, to be agents of healing, to welcome the stranger, to raise children who can love as they have been loved, to teach, to generate wealth and share wealth. All such works matter now in time and will matter continuing into God's eternity.

Read Psalm 146 closely. There is no guarantee. You will find nothing that says it will all work out. But as we take on the tasks that we are called to in these difficult—*evil*—days, we are directed toward the One in whom we should place our confidence. "Do not put your trust in princes—in leaders—in whom there is no help."

Instead, we are told, “Happy are those whose help is God...whose hope is in the Lord their God.”

Tom Long tells a story about a visit he once made to a college chaplains’ group at a major university. He was on an advisory board whose job it was to listen to reports from the chaplains and to offer them support and counsel. At one meeting, an older member of that advisory board asked the chaplains, “What are the university students like morally these days?”

After a minute, one answered, “Well, I think you’d be basically pleased. The students are pretty ambitious about their careers, but that’s not all they are. A lot of them tutor after school. Some work in a night shelter and in a soup kitchen.” She continued, citing the different activities in which the students were engaged doing the important work of ministry.

But as she talked, the Jewish chaplain began to smile.

Finally the chaplain recounting the students’ activities said to him, “Am I saying something funny?”

“No, no, I am sorry,” he replied. “I was just sitting here thinking. You are saying that the university students are good people, and you are right. And you are saying that they are involved in good social causes, and they are. But what I was thinking is the one thing they lack is a vision of salvation.”

At this point, everyone in the group looked at the Jewish chaplain. “No, it’s true,” he said. “If you don’t have some vision of what God is doing to repair the whole creation, you can’t get up every day and work in a soup kitchen. It finally beats you down” (Tom Long, *Day 1*, 2007).

The Psalmist sings of the hope and the help that we need of which the Psalmist sings: Through us, God is repairing all of creation, even through difficult days, *especially* as we live through difficult days. With that hope and help we are able to rise once more and do the work to which we are called.

The German theologian Hans Küng has been of more help to me in this area than most others. He says: “God wills nothing for God’s own sake. God wills nothing for God’s advantage or glory. God wills nothing but humankind’s advantage, true greatness, and ultimate glory.” He concludes: “This then is God’s will: our well-being.”ⁱⁱ

What God wants is life, not death

health, not sickness,

love, not hate

peace, not violence

What God wants is fullness of life for each individual and for all people. *What God wants* is our well-being and the well-being of all creation.

While the rest of the city sleeps off the excess of Saturday or rises to run or to run out for the *Times*, we get up and seek out a parking space in order to come together for this weekly assembly. Here we listen and pray and speak. Perhaps most importantly, we sing. We join that centuries-long line of the faithful singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. We sing so that

we might remember who God is and what God wants—and remembering we might once more go out and seek to align our lives with God's desire for us, for all people, and for all creation.

Keep singing.

¹Hans Kung, *On Being a Christian*