

Farewell Reflections

Part 1 – The Past

Psalm 111

Introduction

The Psalms were written over a roughly one thousand year period from about 1,500 to 500 B.C. The word “psalm” means “song” and they were used as such by the ancient Hebrews in their worship practices. We have 150 psalms within the Old Testament collected together in the Psalter, which means “songbook.”

The Psalter is of an interesting construct. It is divided into five books. I’m not going to outline the number of psalms in each book. But if you are interested, you can turn to Psalm 1 in your own Bible, or to page 463 of the Old Testament in the pew Bible. At the top it says Book I (Psalms 1-41). If you then turn to Psalm 42, you will find the start of Book II, and so on.

In general, the books serve specific purposes. Books I and II celebrate the golden age of Israel’s united monarchy, which lasted until the death of Solomon in the 10th century B.C. Book III is a dark book, full of various writers bemoaning how the righteous suffer. Book IV turns its focus back upon God, who is recognized by the writers to have been Israel’s help in adversity. Book V is primarily devoted to thanking God for Israel’s return from their exile in Babylon.

Psalm 111 falls into that collection of psalms in Book V that celebrate God’s redemption of Israel from captivity. But Psalm 111 does that by looking into the past. As we read Psalm 111 together, we will see where the psalmist speaks of the freeing of the Hebrews from Egyptian captivity, how God provided for them in the wilderness, and later their entrance into the Promised Land.

The Message

I first stood before you preaching God’s word on 7 July 2010. That was just 19 months ago. It was an interesting moment. You came that day to check me out. Who was I and how was I going to fit in with you? For me, it was a unique moment. I had officially retired as of June 30th. The next day I became your pastor, but under different circumstances than a normal appointment. When a pastor comes to a new church, it is for an unspecified period of time. Yes, in our system pastors are appointed for one year at a time, but as long as things are going well between the church and the pastor, then a degree of longevity is usually established between the two.

That was not my situation. The bishop’s intent was that I would serve here for just one year, carrying the label “interim pastor.” My mandate from our district superintendent was to try and help you transition into a new beginning and prepare you to receive a permanent pastor to lead you into the foreseeable future. Thus, as I stood here on that first Sunday, I wondered what we would be able to accomplish together in only one year. As it turned out, we were given an additional eight months, which has been a wonderful blessing.

On that first Sunday I preached the first of three proclamations designed to help us get to know each other and focus on whom and what we were in this church. The three were entitled “What’s In a Name?”, “What’s in a Place?” and “What’s in a People?”

Today, I start the process of closing my ministry with you as I began it – with a series of three messages. In them I will share my reflections about who we have been, who we are, and who and what I see you becoming. Today is Part 1, in which we will look back into the past. In two weeks I will offer Part 2, examining the present. My final Sunday with you will be four weeks from now, on February 26th, when my final message will be Part 3, looking at the future.

So, let's begin with "Farewell Reflections, Part 1 – The Past". There is great value in looking backwards, in both our individual lives, as well as our collective lives. Looking back is not the same as trying to live in the past. Living in the past is destructive; looking back into the past is instructive. From it we warm ourselves with good memories of times gone by, and we learn from those times of struggle and failure in ways that will help shape and focus us for the future.

Psalms 111 lifts up and celebrates what God has done in the past in order to explain the present and the future. In verse 2a the writer says, "Great are the works of the Lord," thus recalling first the greatest work of God among the Hebrews, their Exodus from Egypt, and also laying the foundation for other works of God, as in verse 5a: "He provides food for those who fear him." This refers to the quail and manna provided to the Hebrews after the Exodus as they wandered in the wilderness. In verse 6 the psalmist records, "He has shown his people the power of his works, in giving them the heritage of the nations." This recalled their entry into the Promised Land.

In between these key verses of Israel's heritage from the goodness of God, the writer gives praise and thanksgiving to God noting that what God does is always good, that we see his righteousness in his acts (v. 3), that we are to remember God's acts not just with our memory, but with devotion and obedience (v. 4), that God acts in our lives because of the covenant relationship he has already established with his people (v. 6), that everything God does can be trusted (v. 7), and Salvation comes only from God (v. 9).

All of Psalm 111 leads to verse 10: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." Remember that to stand in fear of God is to stand in utter awe of him. In other words, when we note what God has done with us in the past, then it should be no surprise to us as to what God is doing now, and what God will do in the future. Not only that, but we may continue to expect God's righteousness and good works with us at all times.

I look back at our shared past and I give praise and thanksgiving to God for so much. First, I will always be grateful to God for calling me to come and serve with you in this church. I retired from full-time ministry because I was nearing 70 years of age. But I had not lost my passion for ministry. Coming to be with you filled a need in my soul to continue in ministry with a people who shared my love of God in Christ. It is also humbling to know that God trusted me to faithfully serve him and you. Whenever God calls any of us to do anything, God endows and strengthens us for the task. That is worthy of our praise.

Before I arrived in July 2010, I had heard some of your history, particularly your struggles in recent years. But after I landed on your doorstep, I learned of our church's rich history and heritage. We are a church that is over 100 years old and has stood through thick and thin to serve the Carbondale community and beyond. There have been years of great unity and effectiveness in outreach and worship. There have been years that challenged the church. The church survived a period not that many years ago wherein there was serious discussion about closing the doors. That the church did not close is a testimony to the gritty determination of those who loved what the church stands for and who dreamt of what the church could become again. Such reflects God's goodness and righteousness in strengthening you to stand in the storm and bring the ship through to calmer times. As such, it deserves our praise and thanksgiving. I was also inspired by Wally Finley, who spent three years commuting every other week from Boulder to serve with you.

What I specifically found when I came was a church functioning close to the margin. There were three main committees that kept the church going. Each was chaired by members of long standing. I won't call them old, but I will call them the old guard. On more than one occasion I was told, "Rich, a few of us have been doing this for a very long time, and we have been taking turns chairing every one of the committees. We're tired." We know who these stalwart folks are, and while I empathized with their tiredness, I gave God thanks for empowering them to hold on to preserve the church. Without them, I

would not have had a church to come to and you wouldn't be sitting here today. God's righteousness and good works were evident through them.

There were other folks who had been serving for a long time in various capacities within the church. They too were tired, but they hadn't given up. They were still serving with determined dedication. I give thanksgiving and praise for God's righteous work through them.

Within a short period of time I had discovered something that excited me and fueled my hopes for the future of the church. There were other folks among us, younger in age than the old guard. As I got to know them I sensed within them the potential for a new guard to emerge – people who might be willing to get involved and help relieve and support those who had been holding on for so long. In two weeks I will talk more about how God touched their hearts to give of themselves to serve the church and the Lord in new ways, thereby beginning to move the church forward into the future.

Soon after arriving I met Pastor Melanie Dobson Hughes. An ordained elder in the United Methodist Church, she was working on a doctorate of theology from Duke University. I began to see God's hand present in the continued commitment of all of you, as well as Melanie's presence among us that pointed to the future. God clearly had a plan for our church. My initial wondering about what we were going to be able to do in only one year or so changed to, "This is going to be fun. Let's go." And we went together.

Each of us has a past, a present and a future. The church does also. Clearly, something of our individual experiences are infused with the experiences of the church. We look backward to gain perspective and draw inspiration for the living of the present. But the present is also enmeshed with striving for the very best in the future. In all of it, the author of Psalm 111 says God is to be seen as the strengthening and motivating energy behind all that has been, is now, and will be. As such, the Lord is to be constantly trusted for his righteousness and praised with thanksgiving for his good works among us. As verse 10 records, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom," It is so and it will be so for all of you as the Carbondale Community United Methodist Church Family of Faith! Amen? Amen!

- Pastor Richmond B. Stoakes, Carbondale Community United Methodist Church, 29 January 2012