

**PTL**

**Praise The Lord**

**Rollstone Congregational Church**

**United Church of Christ**

199 Main Street, Fitchburg, MA

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Moderator: Paul Stansel 978-337-1608

Church Organist and Musician: Gavin Klein

# *Fourth Sunday after Epiphany*

## **January 31, 2021**

**Prelude:**

**Prelude for Flutes**

**Robert Donavan**

### **Let Us Rejoice as We Worship:**

All you who would be friends, all you who would be neighbors ...

Let us all learn from the example of Jesus.

The care and concern of Jesus for others ...

Were founded on the love of God, the God we come here to worship today.

Let us join now through love and devotion and in word and song.

Let us praise our Lord God, let us worship God in spirit and truth, and let us give to God our joy and our lives.

### **A Time of Prayer:**

Loving God, You surround us in a warm embrace, and in your love teach us how to love others.

In your Spirit, we ask for guidance and remind us always of your compassion for all humankind.

Help us to keep our eyes and our lives focused on our perfect guide in Jesus Christ.

Enable us to follow the teachings of Jesus above our own way and will.

Help us, too, loving God, to work for growth in your kingdom. Sometimes

it is difficult to speak a word of hope and help to those in need. With the encouragement of your Spirit, may we be faithful builders of your eternal

kingdom. In the name of Christ our Lord, our Hope, our Guide and Savior. Amen.

### **Opening Hymn:**

**“All Things Bright and Beautiful”**

*(refrain)*

All things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small

All things wise and wonderful, the Lord God made them all

Each little flower that opens, each little bird that sings

He made their glowing colors, He made their tiny wings

*(refrain)*

All things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small

All things wise and wonderful, the Lord God made them all

The purple-headed mountain, the river running by

The sunset and the morning, that brightens up the sky

*(refrain)*

All things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small

All things wise and wonderful, the Lord God made them all

The cold wind in the winter, the pleasant summer sun  
The ripe fruits in the garden, He made them every one

*(refrain)*

All things bright and beautiful, all creatures great and small  
All things wise and wonderful, the Lord God made them all

**A Reading from the Scriptures:**

**Psalms 111 (NIV)**

- 1 Praise the Lord!  
I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart,  
in the company of the upright, in the congregation.
- 2 Great are the works of the Lord,  
studied by all who delight in them.
- 3 Full of honor and majesty is his work,  
and his righteousness endures for ever.
- 4 He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds;  
the Lord is gracious and merciful.
- 5 He provides food for those who fear him;  
he is ever mindful of his covenant.
- 6 He has shown his people the power of his works,  
in giving them the heritage of the nations.
- 7 The works of his hands are faithful and just;  
all his precepts are trustworthy.
- 8 They are established for ever and ever,  
to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.
- 9 He sent redemption to his people;  
he has commanded his covenant forever.  
Holy and awesome is his name.
- 10 The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;  
all those who practice it have a good understanding.  
His praise endures forever.

**Musical Interlude:**

**“A Prayer of Peace”**

**Robert Donavan**

**The Message:**

**“Praising The Lord”**

Let’s say you’re watching Hulu and an annoying commercial pops up for mouthwash. The ad shows a woman leaning to pet her dog, and then the camera zooms in for a close-up of her teeth. Suddenly, we’re aware that this woman has bad breath and diseased gums.

Then, we also see in small print — but quite visible — “actor portrayal.”

Why do we see this message?

Because mouthwash companies have a hard time finding “real people” who use their mouthwash and are willing to go on TV with diseased and ugly gums. And the

actors in these portrayals also want viewers to know, “Hey, I’m acting. I had to sit through two hours of makeup to look like this.”

You see this “actor portrayal” disclaimer in other ads, too, like promos for feminine hygiene products, shoe inserts, male performance problems, foot fungus powders, and medications for a host of embarrassing health problems. Real people are not going to line up to endorse these products, no matter how helpful and beneficial the items may be.

On the other hand, some companies have no trouble finding “real people, not actors” to endorse their products. From Dove soap, to Bumble to Chevrolet to eHarmony, “real people” can be found who praise and endorse commercial products or concepts.

Why? If we’re convinced that the person in love with this herbal, eco-friendly shampoo is a real, average middle-class person like us, we’ll try it and buy it. We’ll put down cash for stuff because a person of our own tribe and status loves this shampoo — not some phony Hollywood actor or celebrity.

This is called social realism. It was given birth by social media — platforms on which everyone’s authentic ideas, opinions and feelings are revealed. Social media is a web of gossip, innuendo and outrageous claims. But it’s our gossip, innuendo and outrageous claims and we love it; we believe each other, at least those in our own social or political clan.

This is why most people, according to a recent survey, prefer real people over actors in commercials. It’s just more authentic. The writer of today’s psalm is a real person, like us. Not a professional troubadour, hired to sing praise to Yahweh. This guy’s the real deal.

Reading Psalm 111, you get the feeling that the writer is a millennial texting or posting on Snapchat, Instagram or WhatsApp. Maybe he has his own YouTube channel and this psalm is his recording. He probably has an acoustic guitar. And the song! This is not just a random text; this psalm is a work of art! The song has 22 phrases (excluding verse 1a), each beginning with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. In just 175 words, the singer summarizes the whole history of God’s deliverance of ancient Israel as his poetic homage to the Lord! He’s definitely a millennial or Gen Zer.

Psalm 111 is not a voice-over by a paid performer. There’s nothing fake about this person. He’s real. He’s impressed. And he wants to tell us, sell us and ask us to buy.

So what does he say?

He says, PTL! The first three words summarize the entire song: Praise the Lord! Or literally: hal-lu-yah. Hallelujah!

This psalm is a praise song to God, a point Will Willimon makes in a sermon on this psalm. The psalm is all about God, he observes. It’s not about us. And this is the essence of worship. It’s about God. We might have enormous stress during the week, we might have family problems, we might have issues with the boss, or we may need to lose weight. But when we come together to worship, it’s all about God, not us.

Notice in verse 1: “I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation”. It is one thing to praise God in the privacy of one’s home, or in one’s thoughts. But God likes it when we offer praise publicly. God wants us to be “real people, not actors.” Such a witness or

testimony is believable. It has credibility.

So the writer is not going to worship hoping to “get something” that will help him wiggle out of a tight spot or give him courage in some relationship issue. No, the psalmist focuses on God. This is his goal. This is his worship.

Verse 1 is the writer’s thesis statement. This is followed by an assertion, which is followed by examples to support the assertion and finally, the logical conclusion or outcome — his call to action. Let’s look at each of these.

His statement exclaims!

“Praise the Lord! I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation.” This verse describes what the writer intends to do with his little post. He’s going to praise the Lord.

What does the writer assert?

The writer contends that the “works of the Lord” are great and people who love God’s work actually study them, examine them in detail. They look at every aspect of the works of God, deconstruct them, analyze them, conjecture, hypothesize, extol and rhapsodize. They’re in shock and awe. This is what the author asserts in verse 2.

He then argues that these creative wonders project the honor and majesty of their Creator and that God’s marvelous deeds have earned God a well-deserved reputation: He is a God of enduring righteousness, and moreover, is “gracious and merciful.”

To sum it up: the writer asserts that God is a God of “wonderful deeds” (v. 4), that are clothed in grace and mercy.

This is what the writer of Psalm 111 says.

What would we say?

If you were to send a 240-character tweet praising God, what would you say?

It would be cheating to copy and paste Psalm 111. That would be like hiring a professional actor to say something for you on your behalf.

What would you, the real person, say if asked to offer a “God endorsement” with some peer-to-peer marketing sound bites? Of course, you could start with PTL, but then what?

If this is a difficult exercise for us, it might be a sign that we’re not really engaged with or connected to God, and thus don’t have the words to be real, honest and authentic. What we say might sound fake, and people, especially millennials and Gen Zers, can spot fakes easy peasy. In fact, this is one problem millennials and Gen Zers have with “real people” commercials: sometimes the real people don’t seem real.

Are you real? Or are you just trying to appear real?

So what examples does the writer provide to support his contention (that God is a God of “wonderful deeds” (v. 4) that are clothed in grace and mercy).

His examples are:

God provides food.

God keeps promises.

God shows his power to others.

God is faithful, just and trustworthy.

God sent salvation to his people.



One has the sense that the author of this praise song could have kept on writing. Perhaps he kept it brief because he was running out of alphabet! Clearly, he had a lot of material to work with.

God provided food, he writes. This is a reference to the Israelites' experience in the wilderness when manna and quail sustained them for many years. God also provided water in the desert, which is nothing short of amazing!

God also kept covenant with them, a covenant that began with Abraham and was renewed at Sinai.

God's works were never private, but very public; neighboring nations learned of the great God of the Hebrews.

God is faithful, just and trustworthy, a reference not only to how God delivered the Israelites time and again, but to the Mosaic law that codified the righteousness of God and the expectations God had for the people.

And finally, the writer says that God saved them, redeemed them from destruction. If this is not an example of the "wonderful deeds" of God, then what is?

All of these examples are convincing, even considered one at a time. Even if you had just one of these examples to support the contention that God is a God of "wonderful deeds" (v. 4) that are clothed in grace and mercy, it would be more than enough.

But the writer goes further. He emphasizes the eternity of these wonderful attributes of God. Did you notice that the expression ever or for ever pops up five times in this short praise song?

Verse 3: His righteousness endures for ever.

Verse 5: He is ever mindful of his covenant.

Verse 8: All his precepts are trustworthy. They are established for ever and ever.

Verse 9: He has commanded his covenant for ever.

Verse 10: His praise endures for ever.

Imagine the writer peering into the camera and saying, "Take it from me! If you trust in God, you can be sure that God will keep covenant with you. God is forever, my friend. He doesn't go back or take back, retract or redact, deny or dismiss!" #WhatGodsaysgoes.

So the ancient, real-person scribe wraps it up. The conclusion he suggests to us should now be obvious. The evidence is overwhelming: "Holy and awesome is his name" (v. 9).

But this is his conclusion, not ours. In the final stanzas, he adds, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (v. 10). This fear is not a fraidy-cat kind of fear, not the knee-knocking fear we might experience trying to traverse an icy ledge on Annapurna. No, this "fear" is respect and appreciation. In other words, he's saying, "If you're really smart, you'll buy what I'm selling. Choose me or lose me. Your call."

When you buy in, you will have "good understanding."

This is what the ancient lyricist has to say. It's his testimony. He starts with PTL and he ends with, "His praise endures forever."

What is our testimony? We are called to be real people, not actors, in our relationships with others. People are looking for real people, authentic people,

people who are not showing off, not putting on airs of superiority or self-righteous hypocrisy.

But, of course, we need something positive to say. Do we have anything to say?  
They — all of us — are called to be real people, not actors, in our worship of God.

**Musical Interlude:**

**Liebster Jesu Wir Sind Hier**

**JS Bach**

**A Time of Prayer** — *let us remember all of our brothers and sisters on the prayer list, especially those who are having a difficult time during this period of social distancing. Please share your prayer concerns so that they may be added to the prayer list by emailing your concern to Pastor Dave at [dbhanks92@comcast.net](mailto:dbhanks92@comcast.net) or by calling him direct at 978-821-9571. He is available every evening and on weekends. During this time we suggest that you create a prayer partner with whom you can pair up until we are able to worship together at the church.*

God of great love, we offer our gratitude for our family and our friends, and for friends who are family. We are ever thankful for this church and our church family gathered here. We pray for the safekeeping of all whom we love and we pray for your healing presence for all those who are ill whom we name in our hearts. We pray for our nation and its leaders. May they seek your wisdom and strength and may they lead us in the ways that make for peace. We pray for our world; especially do we pray for those who live where fighting is a way of life and where children carry guns instead of teddy bears. Let it be that all of us might be instruments of your peace and love. God of us all, let us answer words of anger with patience and let us respond to disagreements with compromise. Above all, let us speak the language of faith, especially when we travel roads of uncertainty and fear. We offer our praise and our prayers to the One whose footsteps we strive to follow, Jesus the Christ who taught us to say when we pray..... “Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.”

**Closing Hymn:**

**“How Great Thou Art”**

Oh Lord, my God, when I in awesome wonder  
Consider all the worlds Thy hands have made  
I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder  
Thy power throughout the universe displayed

*(refrain)*

Then sings my soul, my Savior God to Thee  
How great Thou art, how great Thou art  
Then sings my soul, my Savior God to Thee

How great Thou art, how great Thou art  
When through the woods, and forest glades I wander

And hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees  
When I look down from lofty mountain grandeur  
And see the brook, and feel the gentle breeze

*(refrain)*

Then sings my soul, my Savior God to Thee  
How great Thou art, how great Thou art  
Then sings my soul, my Savior God to Thee  
How great Thou art, how great Thou art

And when I think that God, His Son not sparing  
Sent Him to die, I scarce can take it in  
That on the cross, my burden gladly bearing  
He bled and died to take away my sin

*(refrain)*

Then sings my soul, my Savior God to Thee  
How great Thou art, how great Thou art  
Then sings my soul, my Savior God to Thee  
How great Thou art, how great Thou art

When Christ shall come with shout of acclamation  
And take me home, what joy shall fill my heart  
Then I shall bow in humble adoration  
And then proclaim, "My God, how great Thou art"

*(refrain)*

Then sings my soul, my Savior God to Thee  
How great Thou art, how great Thou art  
Then sings my soul, my Savior God to Thee  
How great Thou art, how great Thou art

### **Benediction:**

Let your lives witness to Christ's love.  
Let your words bring reconciliation.  
Let your thoughts be of peace.  
Let your touch bring healing.  
Let your actions count for justice.  
Be a sign of hope and a beacon of joy.  
Go and may God's blessing go with you. Amen.

**Postlude:**

**Prelude No.2**

**Pachelbel**



**PRAYER LIST**

Amy Belli  
Carolyn Barney  
Jack Brigham  
Becky Colwell  
Maureen Daoust  
Rebecca Driscoll  
David Dufour  
Diana Escarbie  
Cathy Fontaine  
Chuck Funk  
Bob and Pat Goguen  
John Hanks, Jr.  
Linda Hurd  
Family of Mary Jackson  
Tom Kazanjian  
Sarah Kee  
Colin Lajoie  
Bob and Doris Lane  
Diane Lane Cormier  
Linda Long  
Lorraine Michaud  
Audrey Painchaud  
Maria Piazza  
Emma Pollice  
Melanie Pouliot  
Jackie Reiss  
Martha Quinn  
Del Sampson  
Elwin Shepard  
Ron Smith  
Diane Staples  
Carole Ann Sumner and Henry  
Donna Thorne  
Daniel Tousignant  
Marilyn Wales  
Mary Wayman

All who are experiencing difficult times and situations

All who are lonely or depressed

All who are personally dealing with the affects of the COVID-19 Virus

All medical personnel – doctors, nurses, testing staff, first responders

Our Governmental Leaders