

Lectionary Scriptures  
in message / liturgy:

Psalm 104:1-9, 24, 35c

2,645 words

Additional Scripture  
references:

Psalm 91:1–2  
Psalm 145:1–8  
Galatians 3:1-5:1  
John 3:16  
Exodus 34:6-7  
2 Thessalonians 1:5-10  
2 Corinthians 1:20  
Acts 2:23,3:13

Key songs:

VU 808 On Eagle's Wings  
MV 209 Go, Make a Diff'rence  
Great Is The Lord (Michael W. Smith)  
MV 122 This Is the Day  
VU 308 Many and great, O God, are your Works

Additional music:

Lift Up Your Voice (Jay Althouse)  
In the Name of the Lord (Sandi Patty)

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## **Great Is The Lord**

The psalms are full of powerful imagery, and one of the most common images is that of a great, majestic, powerful God.

We sang this morning the hymn "On Eagle's Wings" and this is a direct adaptation of Psalm 91, which begins thus:

<sup>1</sup> Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.

<sup>2</sup> I will say of the LORD, "He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust."

In our scripture reading this morning, we heard:

<sup>1</sup> Bless the LORD, O my soul. O LORD my God, you are very great. You are clothed with honour and majesty,

and then, in Psalm 145 (which is the grand-daddy of all psalms proclaiming God's greatness), we read:

I will exalt you, my God the King; I will praise your name for ever and ever.

<sup>2</sup> Every day I will praise you and extol your name for ever and ever.

<sup>3</sup> Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise; his greatness no one can fathom.

<sup>4</sup> One generation commends your works to another; they tell of your mighty acts.

<sup>5</sup> They speak of the glorious splendour of your majesty— and I will meditate on your wonderful works.

<sup>6</sup> They tell of the power of your awesome works— and I will proclaim your great deeds.

<sup>7</sup> They celebrate your abundant goodness and joyfully sing of your righteousness.

What are these psalms, and why are they important?

Pastor Chuck Swindoll writes: "The psalms comprised the ancient hymnal of God's people. The poetry was often set to music—but not always. The psalms express the emotion of the individual poet to God or about God. Different types of psalms were written to communicate different feelings and thoughts regarding a psalmist's situation."

So, to the Hebrew people, the Psalms fulfilled the role that our hymn books fulfill today.

Consider Psalm 91, or as we sang it, "On Eagle's Wings."

This hymn is the sung text of Psalm 91 and has long been a favourite. Michael Joncas, the composer, is an assistant professor of Theology at the University of St. Thoman in St. Paul Minnesota. The Psalm is an assurance to the people of God's faithfulness through all time and circumstance. It is interesting to note that in Voices United the words of the chorus are in the first person (quoting God) while in the original the point of view is in the third person (He will raise you up...) until near the end of the Psalm.

As originally written, the chorus reads "and He will raise you up on eagle's wings" ... so written from the perspective of the supplicant asking for help and support from God.

As we sing it (the edited version in Voices United) it reads "and I will raise you up on eagle's wings" ... so this is the answer, the promise from God. God will raise us up.

Both are valid viewpoints, and I think we can take them together as a prayer and a response to prayer.

Let's look back at our scripture reading again.

After proclaiming how great the LORD is, the psalmist goes on to enumerate many things God does that justify the adoration:

2 wrapped in light as with a garment. You stretch out the heavens like a tent;

3 you set the beams of your chambers on the waters; you make the clouds your chariot; you ride on the wings of the wind;

4 you make the winds your messengers, fire and flame your ministers.

5 You set the earth on its foundations, so that it shall never be shaken.

6 You cover it with the deep as with a garment; the waters stood above the mountains.

7 At your rebuke they flee; at the sound of your thunder they take to flight.

8 They rose up to the mountains, ran down to the valleys, to the place that you appointed for them.

9 You set a boundary that they may not pass, so that they might not again cover the earth.

24 O LORD, how manifold are your works! In wisdom you have made them all; the earth is full of your creatures.

A lot of this goes back to what we've been looking at the past two months... the beauty and majesty of Creation.

Although we're not in Creation Time any longer, we've just celebrated Thanksgiving, where we concluded last week that what we really should be thankful for is that God has given us enough - enough food, enough clothing, enough shelter, enough resources, and, most importantly, enough friends, family, colleagues, and even complete strangers who support us in time of need.

We sang together "Great is the LORD" by Michael W. Smith this morning.

I think you all know I'm a fan of contemporary Christian music, and "Great is the LORD" is one of my favourites, and very much expresses the sentiment of greatness found in the psalms we're looking at today.

It's interesting to consider where this song came from, and what would move someone to write it in the first place.

C. Michael Hawn writes:

*The Psalms have always been a fertile source of inspiration for musicians. From monastic psalm chants and the metrical versions of the psalms by John Calvin's followers, to the more liberal paraphrases of Isaac Watts, singing the psalms in some form has been important throughout Christianity. It is no wonder that contemporary Christian artists such as Michael W. Smith (b. 1957) should turn to the psalms as a source for texts and musical inspiration.*

*Mr. Smith is often considered a "crossover artist" — attaining recognition in both sacred and secular venues. In the early 1990s, this West Virginia native achieved the reputation of being the male counterpart to Amy Grant (b. 1960). His crossover song and music video "Place in This World" (1990) peaked at number 6 on Billboard's Hot 100, and "I Will Be Here for You" (1992), reached number 1 on Billboard's Adult Contemporary Chart.*

*The road to such recognition was not easy, however. Moving to Nashville in 1978, Mr. Smith struggled with drugs and low self-esteem before making a faith commitment to Christ. In 1981, he began working with the Christian band "Higher Ground" and writing songs for Meadowgreen Music, a leading publisher of contemporary Christian music. "How Majestic Is Your Name" achieved hit status when Sandi Patty (b. 1956) recorded it.*

*Mr. Smith received another boost in his career in 1982 when he was asked to play keyboards in a band backing up Amy Grant. He also was composing his own songs.*

*According to his website:*

*Amy's managers, Mike Blanton and Dan Harrell, could not find a Christian record label that would sign Michael or a young New Yorker named Kathy Troccoli. Believing so much in these two young talents, they started Reunion Records. Michael made his very first record in 1983 and it was called "Michael W. Smith Project." Michael wrote all the music and wife Debbie wrote the lyrics. . . Michael continued to tour with Amy, now as her opening act. ("Michael W. Smith: Then and Now,"*

*"Great Is the Lord" was included on this, his first album.*

So that's a bit of the story behind the song.

Would we consider the song a modern-day psalm?

Why not?

We sing a mix of traditional and contemporary songs here at Bolton United Church, and that's one of the things I really like about being part of this congregation.

I like to think that we have great variety in our music, and while not everything appeals to everyone, I'd hazard a guess that in each service, there is at least something for everyone.

If everyone leaves this service thinking that at least one piece of music spoke directly to them, then I think we've hit the mark.

Much of our music this morning follows the theme of the greatness of God and the wonderful beauty of the world around us that God has created.

We sang about God lifting us up on eagle's wings, and sheltering us – the image of God is a refuge is a powerful one indeed, and a welcome one when we are faced with trials or uncertainty.

We sang that “this is the day that God has made” and then acknowledged that in our response, “we will rejoice and be glad.”

We sang “great is the LORD” and acknowledged that “we trust in His love” and commit that we will now “lift up our voice.”

That theme, lifting up our voices, was in the anthem as well.

We agreed that “many and great are your works, O God.” and acknowledge God as the “creator of earth and sky.”

That hymn is interesting, for me at least, because of it's history and the origin of the tune.

"Many and Great" is perhaps the only Native American hymn to be sung broadly in North America beyond its original Dakota culture.

The author and composer of the text and tune, Joseph Renville (1779-1846), was a guide and fur trader of French-Dakota lineage. He received a Roman Catholic education in the French language.

In addition to serving as a guide, he also became a British captain in the War of 1812. Having founded the Columbia Fur Company in 1822, he sold it to the larger American Fur Company in 1827.

The tune name LAC QUI PARLE (lake that speaks) comes from a long, narrow lake running northwest to southeast near the present border of Minnesota and South Dakota. From a settlement at the southeast foot of the lake, Renville made

annual treks to Fort Snelling at Mendota at the confluence of the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers, near what is now Minneapolis and St. Paul.

In 1835, an agent at the fort persuaded Renville to permit a missionary presence at Lac qui Parle, perhaps as a way to deal with the ongoing conflicts between the Ojibway and Dakota in the region.

These missionaries, according to scholar Monte Mason, "took part in an experiment in cross-culturalism the likes of which the prairies had not seen."

According to Mr. Mason, the results of the encounter between the missionaries included a Dakota/English dictionary, Dakota translations of the Bible, a Dakota grammar, a Dakota translation of John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, a Dakota newspaper and school curriculum, and most important for our purposes, a Dakota hymnal, Dakota Odowan (Dakota Song), produced by the missionaries -- minister Stephen Riggs, physician John Williamson and composer James Murray.

So that's the context behind yet another song that praises the greatness of God and the majesty of God's creation.

There has been a bit of a movement in recent decades to tone down some of the imagery... to move from a God who is omnipotent and powerful to one who is gentle and nurturing.

But I don't see why both viewpoints can't coexist.

All of the things God has done for us are precisely because of God's omnipotence.

Matthew Harmon is a Professor of New Testament Studies at Grace Theological Seminary. He writes:



*When you turn the page from the end of the Old Testament to the beginning of the New Testament, it can seem like you are entering a different world. In some respects that is true; four hundred years have passed, the Jews are ruled over by the Romans rather than the Persians, and there are new groups of people such as Pharisees and Sadducees. To these, some would add at least one more difference between the Old and New Testaments — that God himself is different in the Old Testament vs New Testament.*

*One common way this belief is stated is to claim that the God of the Old Testament is a god of wrath, whereas the God of the New Testament is a god of love. While on the surface this claim may seem plausible, a closer look at the Bible shows it is seriously mistaken. The God who pours out his wrath against sin in the Old Testament is the same God who will inflict the vengeance of eternal punishment on those who do not believe in his Son Jesus (2 Thessalonians 1:5-10).*

*At the same time, the God who in the New Testament is described as loving the world enough to send his Son for their salvation (John 3:16) is the same God who revealed himself to Moses as “merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin” (Exodus 34:6-7). From Genesis to Revelation, we see both God’s stunning love and his terrifying wrath against sin and wickedness - highlighting the fallacy of a different God in the Old Testament and New Testament.*

Harmon goes on to show how this is confirmed directly in Scripture:

*In fact, the New Testament authors consistently claim that the God revealed in the Old Testament is the same God who is now revealing himself in and through Jesus Christ. Referring to Jesus as the Word, John writes, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the*

*beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made" (John 1:1-3). Later in that same chapter, John writes, "No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he [i.e., the Word] has made him known" (John 1:18). John's point is clear: the God of the Old Testament has taken on flesh and lived among us in the person of Jesus Christ.*

*As the earliest followers of Jesus began preaching the good news of his death and resurrection, they repeatedly emphasized that the God of the Old Testament had fulfilled his promises in and through Jesus Christ. Peter asserts that Jesus was "delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23) and that "The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified his servant Jesus" (Acts 3:13). Paul argues that all who believe in Jesus Christ, regardless of their ethnicity or gender, inherit the blessings that God promised to Abraham (Galatians 3:1-5:1). He can even go so far as to say that "all the promises of God find their "Yes" in Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 1:20).*

Does that change how we look at the imagery of the greatness of God?

It puts it into perspective, and that perspective is that God's greatness is precisely why the great and omnipotent God is also the God of love and endless mercy.

We'll finish up in a moment by listening to another of my favourite contemporary songs, "In the Name of the Lord." This song was written by Gloria Gaither and Sandi Patty. It completes the story we've looked at in the Psalms, by adding the New Testament part of the story.

*There is strength in the name of the Lord*

*There is power in the name of the Lord*

*There is hope in the name of the Lord*

*Blessed is He, who comes in the name of the Lord*

That's the power and majesty of the Old Testament God, but personified in the "man from Galilee"... Jesus, who comes in the name of the LORD.

*His name will be worshipped forever... Creator, Redeemer and King*

So this, too, is a new psalm... a song telling, as Chuck Swindoll said, "the emotion of the individual poet to God or about God."

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD.

God is great.

We wonder at the majesty of God's creation. We marvel at the world around us. We feel God's touch, and we experience God's grace and God's love.

And, most importantly, we are thankful.

Thanks be to God.