

## Sermon – July 7<sup>th</sup> 2024 – Bolton United Church

Andrew Dunn

Lectionary Scriptures  
in message / liturgy:

Psalm 48  
Mark 6: 1 – 12

2,665 words

Additional Scripture  
references:

Psalm 47  
Psalm 46: 10

Key songs:

Humble Thyself / Awesome God  
VU 223 Eternal, Unchanging, We Sing to Your Praise  
MV 185 Ev'ry Day is a Day of Thanksgiving  
VU 343 I Love to Tell the Story  
Hallelu Hallelu Hallelu – Praise Ye the Lord

Additional music:

Prayer of St. Francis (Peter Togni)  
Awesome in This Place (Kent Henry)

---

## Hallelujah!

Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised in the city of our God. [Psalm 48]

Praise the LORD.

The word Hallelujah comes from the Hebrew phrase *hall-u Yah* which means, literally, praise Yah.

Now Yah, of course, is in turn short for what we'd say in English as Yahweh, but in Hebrew would be written with the four consonants Y H W and H again. Written Hebrew doesn't have vowels in it, so when read, we'd pronounce that Yahweh or, often, Jehovah.

This can be considered, therefore, as a command to praise God, or as usually translated, Praise the LORD.

Christians tend to use it as a joyful exclamation of voluntary praise, rather than seeing it as a command.

It's a spontaneous exclamation of joy and praise toward our maker, the Living God.

It also tends to be used in a secular context, as an exclamation of happiness or surprise, or even a bit sarcastically:

"I know Dave said he was running late, but I see him walking in from the parking lot".

"Well, Hallelujah"

I always imagine it in that context as akin to what Archimedes exclaimed (reportedly Eureka) after making his great discovery.

Eureka, in Greek, essentially means "I have found it."

He reportedly proclaimed "Eureka! Eureka!" after he had stepped into a bath and noticed that the water level rose, whereupon he suddenly understood that the volume of water displaced must be equal to the volume of the part of his body he had submerged. He then realized that the volume of irregular objects could be measured with precision, which nobody had yet figured out how to do. He is said to have been so eager to share his discovery that he leapt out of his bathtub and ran naked through the streets of Syracuse.

The only thing is that when I imagine Archimedes saying it, I hear it in a southern Texas drawl, as if he said:

"Well, Hah-lee-lew-yah"

That would actually be surprising, of course, since Archimedes was Greek and didn't speak English. Not that English had been invented yet in his day, of course.

But it still amuses me to hear it that way.

A lot of us use Hallelujah that same way, whether we're being sarcastic or sincere. In a secular context, it expresses satisfaction at a positive outcome or celebration that things have gone our way.

Let's have a little fun and some morning calisthenics with this. Here's a fun song we used to do years ago as a camp song. Like all good camp songs, it has a back-and-forth nature to it, involving two groups. So I'm going to divide you all into two groups, and each will have a part to play.

So those of you on my left will be the HALLELUJAH gang, and those on the right will be the PRAISE YE THE LORD gang.

Hallelu Hallelu Hallelu Hallelujah! **Praise Ye the LORD!**

Hallelu Hallelu Hallelu Hallelujah! **Praise Ye the LORD!**

**Praise Ye the LORD** - Hallelujah!

**Praise Ye the LORD** - Hallelujah!

**Praise Ye the LORD** - Hallelujah!

**Praise Ye the LORD!**

Like all good camp songs, it also has some silly actions to it - in this case, standing up and sitting down.

So now, if you are able, when you sing your part - stand up - and when you finish singing your part, sit down. Let's try it again...

Hallelu Hallelu Hallelu Hallelujah! **Praise Ye the LORD!**  
Hallelu Hallelu Hallelu Hallelujah! **Praise Ye the LORD!**

**Praise Ye the LORD** - Hallelujah!  
**Praise Ye the LORD** - Hallelujah!  
**Praise Ye the LORD** - Hallelujah!  
**Praise Ye the LORD!**

In essence, we are talking about praising God, something we do frequently here at church.

The Psalms are mostly filled with various kinds of praise to God. Psalm 48, which we read this morning, begins

*Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised in the city of our God.*

and concludes with

*Walk about Zion, go all around it, count its towers, consider well its ramparts; go through its citadels, that you may tell the next generation that this is God, our God forever and ever. He will be our guide forever.*

This suggests (and the theme is repeated in many of the Psalms) that it's not enough to just praise God ourselves - what we must do is share that message with others.

That is exactly what Jesus was trying to do in our Gospel reading this morning, having gone to his hometown:

*On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands!*

*Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joseph and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him.*

*Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honour, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house."*

That didn't go so well, did it?

The message was not very well received.

In this case, it was likely because the people knew him and his family, and one of two things was true:

(1) they were offended because he had been one of them and was now claiming to be "from God" and thus on a much higher level than his family's neighbours, or

(2) they still weren't sure they believed the miracle which was purported to have occurred pretty much before their very eyes.

So based on that Biblical example, it takes a brave soul to go out in the world, praising God and bearing witness to the miraculous stories of Jesus.

What we do here in shared worship is, nevertheless, a part of that, albeit somewhat safer since the theory is we are all believers gathered here.

When we sang “Our God is an Awesome God” we were bearing witness to that story.

The title of that part of the song actually comes from another Psalm, the one immediately before our reading this morning.

Psalm 47 begins with:

*Clap your hands all you peoples; shout to God with a jubilant cry.  
For the LORD, the Most High is awe-inspiring; a great King over the whole earth.*

The LORD is awe-inspiring.

Our God is an awesome God.

That part of Psalm 47 actually comes from the 10<sup>th</sup> verse of Psalm 46, which reads:

*Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!*

So here we have a whole series of Psalms telling us that God is great, and is exalted everywhere, and awe-inspiring, and we should praise God at every opportunity.

Or, put another way, Hallelujah.

So is that what worship is - praising God and telling others to praise God?

It's a big part of it.

Another big part is sharing the stories we believe as part of our Christian faith.

We sang I Love to Tell the Story as our opening hymn. It, in narrative form, outlines one Christian's desire to share the Good News in story form, and how it satisfies the need they feel to do so:

*I love to tell the story  
of unseen things above,  
of Jesus and his glory,  
of Jesus and his love.  
I love to tell the story  
because I know it's true;  
it satisfies my longings  
as nothing else can do.*

We talked last week about how hard it is to believe things we can't see, and yet here is a longing to tell others about things we can't see, but we have to trust are true.

I guess, to coin a phrase, we have to tell the stories at "faith value."

We know and love the words written in 1866 by Katherine Hankey... but would you be surprised to know there are more verses than the ones we usually sing?

Two of them go like this:

*An angel brought glad tidings:  
"Send all your fears away,  
for Christ, your Lord and Savior,  
is born for you this day."*

*Then many other angels  
sang praise for Jesus' birth:  
"To God on high be glory,  
and peace to all the earth."*

and

*O wonderful redemption!  
The price for sin is paid,  
salvation is accomplished,  
my heart is unafraid,  
for God has raised Christ Jesus  
to show the work was done;  
his glorious resurrection  
declared the vict'ry won!*

And then, to finish up, is a verse instructing us how to keep the story going:

*The Savior of all people  
has brought his peace to you;  
now go and tell the story,  
for others need it too.  
To ev'ry land and nation  
ring out the gospel call;  
proclaim that Christ is risen  
and grants his peace to all.*



So it isn't just a hymn about how the story comforts us or satisfies our longings. It's actually a song that summarizes the important parts of the story, and then tells us what we have to do.

**Now go and tell the story, for others need it to.**

**Proclaim that Christ is risen, and grants his peace to all.**

It's a pity we don't sing that part of the hymn, because it takes something that was really about us (satisfying our longings, or put another way, making us feel good) and turns it into something we are called to go and do.

The hymn wasn't written as a hymn, originally. The verses were various parts of a much longer work written as a poem, and then edited to produce the hymn we know today.

Arabella Katherine Hankey was an English nurse and missionary. She had a serious spell of sickness while on a mission in Africa. During her long days of convalescence, she wrote a long piece on the life of Jesus in 1866 in two parts entitled "*Tell me the Old, Old Story of unseen things above*". The first part was a poem of fifty stanzas titled "The Story Wanted" (dated 29 January 1866), and second part titled "The Story Told" (dated 18 November 1866). The verses of the hymn came from that second poem.

The tune was composed by William Fischer, a professor of music at Girard College in Philadelphia, and appeared in *Fischer's Joyful Songs* published in 1869 by the Methodist Episcopal Book Room.

American composer William Doane set the first part to music also, and that became the well-known hymn *Tell Me the Old, Old Story* - Doane had been

impressed at hearing the poem recited at a YMCA Convention in Montreal in 1867.

Most of what we do in worship comes down to this basic theme... passing on stories.

It is worth keeping in mind that most stories were not, originally, written down, but were passed on orally from one person to the next, and from generation to generation.

That accounts for some of the variations in what eventually became recorded versions - but the stories are essentially the same.

Even the slight discrepancies between some of the stories in the four Gospels have the same origin - those stories, also, were not written down until decades or in some cases centuries after they took place.

But the message of the hymn is simple - tell the story and keep it going, for it is important to know what our God has done for us.

The prayer usually attributed to St. Francis of Assisi (although it was almost certainly not written by him) is more accurately called the "Peace Prayer" and we sang Peter Togni's arrangement of it this morning.

Giovanni di Pietro di Bernardone (c. 1181 - 3 October 1226), known as Francis of Assisi, was an Italian mystic, poet, and Catholic friar who founded the religious order of the Franciscans. Inspired to lead a Christian life of poverty, he became an itinerant preacher.

Pope Francis, the current pontiff, took his papal name to honour Francis of Assisi.

The first appearance of the Peace Prayer occurred in France in 1912 in a small spiritual magazine called La Clochette (which means “the little bell”), published in Paris by The Holy Mass League, a Catholic association known founded in 1901 by a French priest, Father Bouquerel. The prayer bore the title of “A Beautiful Prayer to Say During the Mass” and was published anonymously.

Around 1920, the prayer was printed by a French Franciscan priest on the back of an image of St. Francis with the title “Prayer for Peace” but without being attributed to the saint.

The first translation in English that we know of appeared in 1936 in “Living Courageously,” a book by Kirby Page, a Disciples of Christ minister. Page attributed the text to St. Francis of Assisi. Other sources give Cardinal Spellman credit for the title by which it is known today. There is evidence that he came across the prayer in Italy, brought it back with him to the United States, and had it printed under the title “Prayer of St. Francis”. During the Second World War and immediately after, this prayer for peace began circulating widely as the Prayer of St. Francis and over the years has gained a worldwide popularity with people of all faiths.

Regardless of its origin, and the fact that St. Francis almost certainly had no hand in its creation, it is a much beloved prayer. We usually sing it as the hymn “Make Me a Channel of your Peace.”

Rather than telling us to out and share the story, it is a much more personal, intimate exploration of our connection to God. It does, though, have the same commandment to action as the other Psalms and hymns we’ve considered this morning, although the actions prescribed are different:

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:  
where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
where there is injury, pardon;*

*where there is doubt, faith;  
where there is despair, hope;  
where there is darkness, light;  
where there is sadness, joy.*

*O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek  
to be consoled as to console,  
to be understood as to understand,  
to be loved as to love.  
For it is in giving that we receive,  
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,  
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.*

So this prayer asks for the strength, courage and wisdom to do the right thing by passing on what God needs us to pass on. We are encouraged to pay it forward... when there's doubt, we should share faith. Where there is hatred, we are to counter that with love. Where there is darkness, we are to shine a light. And where people are sad, we are to spread and share joy.

This isn't exactly "Praise the LORD" and yet, in a way, it is.

We can explicitly praise the Living God, but we can also implicitly do those things that God would have us do. And particularly, when we care for others, we are in fact doing what the second part of our reading from Mark's Gospel says that the Twelve were called to do - essentially, to teach everyone about God's Word, to have power over unclean spirits, and to proclaim that all should repent.

And in spirit, at least, that is certainly testifying to God's goodness, power, majesty and might.

We can do all the things we heard this morning.

**Humble yourself in the sight of the LORD, and be lifted up by God's power.**

**Don't so much seek to be loved, as to share love.**

**Tell everyone that our God is an awesome God.**

**Tell the next generation that this is God, our God forever and ever.**

**Be an instrument of God's peace.**

**Now go and tell the story, for others need it too.**

**Proclaim that Christ is risen and grants his peace to all.**

And those, in my mind, are very good ways to praise the LORD.

Praise the LORD - thanks be to God.