

# “Festivals and Praise”

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Psalm 148: 1-13

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Do you enjoy celebrations? I know that I do. We have had to miss or substantially cut back on celebrating over the past fifteen months due to the Covid-19 pandemic. I missed those special events and I suspect that you did too. Birthdays, Christmas, Valentine's Day, Easter and summer holidays. Times when we look forward to gathering with friends and family. Zoom helps, but it is not the same.

We are a people who look forward to celebrations. Many celebrations involve praise for the special person or people who we are celebrating. Praise! It is a powerful word. Our Scripture reading this morning includes the word “Praise” ten times. It was written by King David. He was a man who had made many mistakes in his lifetime but in one thing he was steadfast – giving praise to God!

In this Psalm he wants all of creation in our world and beyond to the heavens and the angels to praise God. Even things which we would consider to be inanimate, such as fire and hail, snow and frost and stormy winds. His instructions definitely include all living things, no matter how large or small. And we as humans are most definitely included! Whether young or old, rich or poor, we are to praise our God!

But how about other celebrations? This past week has seen the celebration of Canada Day. It is not so much a time of food but of fireworks. Today, our neighbours to the South in the United States are celebrating their Independence Day and we can be sure of lots of fireworks in the sky. We very often think of celebrations in terms of food! Many, if not most of them involve food. We in the United Church do know something about food, don't we? Potlucks, teas, bake sales, snacks after service...

But, should we be celebrating at this time? This year there is some reluctance to praise – our Country, our leaders, even each other. This is because of the tragic news we have learned over the past weeks about how children were abused at the residential schools, and how a family was murdered because they were Muslims. And now, after enduring record setting heat, the village of Lytton has been devastated by a forest fire.

Still, Canada is more than these events. God wanted His people to hold festivals. In the book of Leviticus the Israelites were told to hold a number of events. First was the Sabbath, the seventh day of the week when no work was to be done. The first major annual event was Passover, the time when the Israelites remembered, praised God and gave thanks for their delivery from slavery in Egypt. This involved food but it was unleavened bread, commemorating the urgent departure from Egypt.

The next festival was the Festival of First Fruits. This was started when the first crops were grown and harvested in Israel after they had returned to the Holy Land. It included an offering to God of a lamb, a sheaf of grain and a drink offering of wine. The people would indeed enjoy a feast but only after the offering had been made to God. The first priority was to praise and thank God.

The next festival was called the Festival of Weeks. This was because it was held seven weeks after the festival of first fruits. It also involved an offering to God, even more expansive than the last one. Giving first to God – what a concept!

The Festival of Trumpets followed. It was a celebration, on the first day of the seventh month. It was one day when no occupational work was done. It was a holy day of convocation commemorated with trumpet blasts.

God was not done yet. The next important day was different. It was the Day of Atonement. A day when there was no feasting, indeed no eating at all.

The final festival was called the Festival of Booths. People did not eat in their homes but rather in booths set up outside. Eat, they did, but with strict regard to dietary laws.

Some of this may sound familiar but some of these events do not. However, Jewish people still obey these laws right up to the present time. But what about us Christians? We don't follow all these festival rules, but some may sound very familiar. In fact some of our celebrations are based on the ones given to the Israelite people.

Our communion service is based on the Passover meal, for this is when Jesus initiated our service of remembrance. We also celebrate Thanksgiving. We do not often bring gifts of food although we do

sometimes bring donations for the food bank. Certainly we do thank and praise God for a bountiful harvest.

So do we have other occasions to be festive? We certainly do. The first one that comes to mind is, of course, Christmas. We certainly celebrate that event. But we were not the first. In the Gospel of Luke we read that when Christ was born there were shepherds in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night. And lo, an angel of the Lord appeared before them and the glory of the Lord shone round about them and they were afraid. The angel was a messenger from God and when the message was given a multitude of the heavenly host joined in praising God and singing "Glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace, good will toward men." These were the first ones to praise our Lord. The second group was not far behind. The shepherds, when they had seen the baby, they returned "glorifying and praising God for all that they had seen and heard." So we have some pretty good examples to follow when we praise God at Christmas.

Our second major celebration is, of course, Easter when we celebrate the risen Christ. But Easter is not only about celebrating. The Easter season starts with Ash Wednesday and that is not a celebration. It is an acknowledgement that we often fall short of what God would have us do. It is followed by the 40 days of Lent which occur over a period of six and a half weeks. Sundays are not included in the 40 day count. This is time for reflection. Often it is accompanied by giving up an activity or something like a decadent food. Or, it can be a time to do something that we usually do not make the time for...helping someone, giving to those in need, or extra time spent in prayer. So, yes, on Easter Sunday we celebrate! The gift of God, his Son Jesus, is certainly something to celebrate and we can and should sing and shout our praises to God!

I believe that God approves of celebrations! When it involves celebrating what God has done for us and praising God for His abundant generous love to us, it is welcome.

But how about other celebrations such as Canada Day, Labour Day, birthdays, anniversaries or Valentine's Day. Does God want us to celebrate these types of occasions too?

Well, let's think about this. Birthdays and anniversaries celebrate a special event. They involve being thankful for and recognizing the individual; the couple or group who the occasion is held for. So, yes, we should celebrate

these events. God has made these events possible. God has given us the ability to remember these special dates, to appreciate someone and/or something besides ourselves. And that is a good thing. We should also praise God for making these events possible.

What about an event like a graduation? A number of us, including me were celebrating a graduate this June. Our younger granddaughter graduated from High School. Unfortunately, our grads this year were unable to gather for this special event. We watched the ceremony, without the grads present, on our computer. It helped, but it was not the same. So, we can certainly praise these young people for their accomplishments and give thanks and praise to God for this young generation, especially those starting on the next phase of their lives.

Canada Day this year felt quite different. Some flags were at half-mast in recognition of the many young lives lost at residential schools. Ceremonies were muted or concentrating on reflection of our past history. Yet, some families did set off fireworks at their homes. And that is O.K. Our young people, especially, need to be aware of our past history but must also be grateful for this country, for we live in a wonderful country. It is majestic in its scope: from the Atlantic Ocean, through the Maritime Provinces, through Quebec and the St. Lawrence River to the cities and wilderness areas of Ontario. From the Great Lakes, across the Prairies to the Rocky Mountains and to the Pacific Ocean. From the Northern territories to the border with the United States. We should certainly be praising God for this country, Canada.

So, while we must learn from past mistakes, let us also recognize the good that is Canada. Canadians have been responsible for many inventions both important to humanity and some, perhaps, just making life more pleasant. These include such items as the Pacemaker invented in 1949, Insulin invented in 1929 and Pablum for infants, invented in 1930. But Canada also made life more pleasant by inventing items such as the game of basketball, the Goalie mask; invented by professional goalie Jacques Plante in 1959. We are also responsible for the green polyethylene garbage bag.

Any way you look at it, God has gifted Canadians with talents and skills that have improved life for everyone. For this, we should surely give thanks and praise to God.

So, on this day, while we work to reconcile with our aboriginal nations, let us ask God for the perseverance to improve our country, to celebrate what has and will be done right and above all to praise our God!