

Psalm 111  
“**Delight in God’s Doings**”  
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Roslindale Congregational Church, UCC, Roslindale, MA  
Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, August 15, 2021

*Introduction:*

*Today’s Psalm is a song of praise. It may have been used in Jewish worship services, and it is considered connected to Psalm 112. The prominent theme is God’s works.*

*The Reading:*

*<sup>1</sup> Praise the Lord!*

*I will give thanks to God with my whole heart,  
in the company of the upright, in the congregation.*

*<sup>2</sup> Great are the works of the Creator,  
studied by all who delight in them.*

*<sup>3</sup> Full of honor and majesty is his work,  
and God’s righteousness endures forever.*

*<sup>4</sup> The Almighty has gained renown by his wonderful deeds;  
the Lord is gracious and merciful,*

*<sup>5</sup> providing food for those who fear him;  
God is ever mindful of the covenant.*

*<sup>6</sup> The Holy One has shown his people the power of his works,  
in giving them the heritage of the nations.*

*<sup>7</sup> The works of God’s hands are faithful and just;  
all his precepts are trustworthy.*

*<sup>8</sup> They are established forever and ever,  
to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.*

*<sup>9</sup> The Lord sent redemption to his people and  
has commanded the covenant forever.  
Holy and awesome is God’s name.*

*<sup>10</sup> The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;  
all those who practice it have a good understanding.  
Praise from the heart endures forever.*

At our former pastorate in North Carolina, when my husband and I announced that we would teach a Sunday morning adult bible study on the Old Testament books of Kings and Chronicles, we were pleased to see the Pastors Study crammed with eager participants! A former minister of that church had been a charismatic teacher who knew Hebrew and Greek well and left a legacy of the love of learning among them. As verse two of our Psalm says, these congregants *delighted in* studying the works of God.

That was a wonderful experience, but in church, we should tell the truth: **Many adults do *not* delight in studying God’s works. They have *no idea* what the Psalmist is talking about this morning!**

There are reasons for this, of course. These folks probably don't know where to begin in the bible, or they are haunted by an old, negative experience of school or church. Adults can be intimidated by what they don't know and avoid bible studies. Or they may never find the time to attend an adult learning experience because there is always *something else* they have to do for the family. Still others think that Christian education is just for children, or rationalize that there is nothing new for them to learn. A short attention span may also contribute, or the assumption that these bible learning experiences will be boring.

Of course, *the church* can be the culprit. Not making it interesting and relevant, or coming across as judgmental does *not* help people delight in study!

**No matter the cause, the effect is a real loss.** It's a shame when adults don't keep learning about God's works; this stunts both individual and congregational growth.

John Westerhoff wrote an accessible book on the developmental stages of faith under the provocative title, "Will Our Children Have Faith?"<sup>1</sup> In it, he describes four consecutive stages: 1) the first is where children learn basic trust, 2) the second stage is where belonging to a faith group becomes uppermost, next, 3) a questing faith seeks answers to the tough questions, growing into an 4) "owned" faith in Christ that enables a Christian to live out evangelism, service, and the pursuit of justice.

Well, since many church people drop out of faith learning at age twelve or thirteen, and then as adults, rely only on sporadic sermons, they probably will not take the opportunity to ask their questions or grow into a rich and well-grounded adult faith! Without life-long learning, it is unlikely that Christians will develop a maturity sufficient for tough times, wisdom for an uncertain future, or be able to express a good news to others that attracts and makes faith worth their while. It certainly won't be *a delight!*

**This *doesn't* need to be the case! You can get to delight by doing it – by studying God's works and Word together.**

To illustrate from another realm of life: I remember when math felt hard and boring, but I also remember geometry and later trigonometry, when math, though still hard, was so much more interesting and meaningful. It took some staying power on my part and effort, but eventually I found myself delighting in sine and cosine and the mathematical structure of the universe.

Similarly, in the Streisand movie *Yentl*, this Jewish girl goes to extremes to study the Torah – the Hebrew scripture. In her orthodox tradition, females were forbidden, but her rabbi father had secretly taught her. She excelled at learning the bible and became hungry for more. Upon her dad's death, Yentl went to another town, masqueraded as a boy, and joined the Yeshiva. Upon arrival she sings with delight: *I can open doors and take from the shelves all the books I've longed to hold. I can ask all the questions, the whys and the wheres, as the mysteries of life unfold...*<sup>2</sup>

**When we study the works of God with our whole hearts and with others as Psalm 111 invites, it brings forth the delight that many adults have been missing.**

You see, after the exile to Babylon, in the 6<sup>th</sup> century before Christ, the people of God had lost their temple, their land, and their king; *all* their religious institutional

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<sup>1</sup>John H. Westerhoff III, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1976). The names he gives to the four types are: Experienced, Affiliative, Searching, and Owned.

<sup>2</sup>"This is One of Those Moments" from *Yentl*, 1983.

structures had been destroyed. I'm not sure that you and I, even in a pandemic, can fathom the crisis of faith this was! The later psalms were probably composed in the aftermath of this disaster, and scholars surmise that across the ensuing centuries, the Psalms reminded the people about the past works of God: the Exodus, the Covenant, and the passage through uncertain times.<sup>3</sup> They studied the Psalms and grew into a deeper and questioning faith, eventually "owning" that *God* alone was their king and their home, and that their worship could happen wherever they were. It was during this period of *disestablishment* that the Jews established local synagogues. **Studying the past works of God opened up their future.**

I look forward to a bible study with you in the Fall on the letter to the Galatians. Before he wrote this letter, like his ancestors, the apostle Paul studied the past covenant God had made with Abraham, and this helped him interpret his present situation with that church. He discerned that God's covenant in Abraham was confirmed in Christ, and so Gentile Christians did not need to practice circumcision in order to be right with God. They had become children of Abraham and part of the covenant *in Christ*: "no longer Jew or Greek..." (Galatians 3:28)<sup>4</sup>

I look forward to *us* wrestling with Galatians in order to interpret how God is at work *now* and, more specifically, the implications it reveals for today's complex work on anti-racism. I'm sure that this bible study will also help us interpret other aspects of living with faith during this crazy point in history.

**Studying the past works of God opens up our future, and it'll be a delight!**

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<sup>3</sup>J. Clinton McCann, Jr., "The Book of Psalms," *The New Interpreters Bible, Volume IV* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 660-664.

<sup>4</sup>Richard B. Hays, "The Letter to the Galatians," *The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume XI* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 272-273.