PSALM 149
PRAISE THE LORD

Today is the day to celebrate all the saints of the Lord, both those with us and those who have passed onto God's glory. Our Psalm for today is one that is full of praise for the Lord and mention of the godly. This is a beautiful Psalm for today. We're summoned to be glad in the God who created us. We are to rejoice with dancing and music because God adorns us with salvation. God clothes us with salvation in Baptism, clothing us with Christ, dressing us with bright robes of righteousness. This Psalm tells us that the message of our salvation should move us to praise God not only during the day and in church, but we should also be moved to rejoice in song on our beds. We should go to sleep secure in God's love and forgiveness.

Yet generally that's not our habit as Lutherans. There's no dancing in church, and our praises often don't sound like glad rejoicing. So, when this Psalm takes a sudden downturn, we may feel more comfortable. Or you may not have noticed it when we read it earlier? Yet, if you didn't notice it, we'll take a closer look at the Psalm so that you can see and maybe even feel the drastic difference that lies within.

Our sermon text is divided into two parts. Verses 1–5 are in praise of God's saving work on behalf of His people. Verse six is a transitioning verse from praises for God's saving work, to His judgment upon the nations. In Psalm 149, the psalmist brings two very different things together. One moment God's people are praising Him for saving them. The next moment they have swords in their hands ready to execute vengeance on their enemies. That's quite a contrast. Some may find this confusing at best, or offensive at worst.

Many who read the Bible have felt uncomfortable with the bluntness of some of the Psalms. They have suggested that Psalms like these, or at least it's latter part, have no place in the Bible, or the life of the Christian. They say that God is a God of love. Since this is true, we have to ask how prayers that call for vengeance and punishments can be reconciled with our Lord's command to love one another as we heard last week from the Gospel of Matthew.

We go one week from hearing Jesus say, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Matthew 22:37-39), to this week hearing God say, "Execute vengeance on the nations and punishments on the peoples, to bind their kings with chains and their nobles with fetters of iron, to execute on them the judgment written!" (v's 7-9).

How we make sense of this is that such words of vengeance are directed at evil that's directly opposed to God, such as kings and nobles who sought

Israel's destruction, and nations who were at odds with God's plan of salvation. Such evil must be thwarted by God. Yet, if the evil nation will repent, then so will God, and they won't experience His vengeance.

Where hearts are turned back towards God they'll rejoice. So we can pray these Psalms for God to thwart evil, and then we can praise God when either justice is done or people repent and turn back to the Lord their God. We're all sinners in need of God's mercy and grace as much as anyone else in this world. So we can pray this entire Psalm in faith in the crucified and risen Christ who clothes us with His salvation knowing that our enemies have been conquered. We don't have to get squeamish when we reach the middle portion, because we know that in the end we're praising the Lord again.

So let's reflect on this Psalm in light of Christ and His ministry, because He's the heart, core, and center of Scripture, and the key to its true meaning.

Verse 1: "Praise the Lord! Sing to the Lord a new song, His praise in the assembly of the godly." The phrase "a new song" doesn't refer to a tune that hasn't been heard before. Rather, it points to a new era in salvation history, to the coming of the Lord and His kingdom.

Verse 2: "Let Israel be glad in his Maker." We don't create ourselves. God Himself creates us as His people and gathers us together as His children. Thus, we boldly and unashamedly can declare that all people are made in the image of God, and that their lives have value. God gives human life that value, and as our Creator only He has the right to end a life

Verse 3: "Let them praise His name with dancing, making melody to Him with tambourine and lyre!" We might skip over that verse, because Lutherans don't dance, use tambourines or lyres in church. I wonder what kind of shocking experience we'll encounter in heaven when we see dancing and all sorts of musical instruments. That's something to think about as we try to praise our Lord God of all.

Verse 4: "For the Lord takes pleasure in His people; He adorns the humble with salvation." The Hebrew word for adorn means "to clothe with beauty". That describes every Old Testament believer who looked forward to the coming of Christ, and it describes all of us who now walk in the light of Christ. The apostle Paul writes that all of us who have been baptized into Christ have clothed ourselves with Christ (Galatians 3:27). You cannot be more beautifully adorned than that, and God cannot be more pleased with you than that.

Verse 5: "Let the godly exult in glory; let them sing for joy on their beds." Another non-Lutheran verse. How many of you have ever sang in bed? I've never done that. I pray in bed, but sing, never. Does the extent of joy that God

wishes for you to feel for having been clothed with salvation make you feel uncomfortable? Well, don't worry about that, verse six is next.

(Verse 6:) "Let the high praises of God be in their throats and two-edged swords in their hands." We get to praise God and wield a sword at the same time. I don't know about you, but here is where us Scandinavians get excited. We get to wield swords as Christians.

Swords in the hands of God's people are two-edged. They're more powerful than your ordinary ones. They symbolize the most powerful sword of all: God's Word, His Law and Gospel. We read in Hebrews, "For the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (4:12). In Ephesians 6, Paul describes the whole armor of God with which each believer is equipped, and in our hands is the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God.

We're supposed to go forth with this Word of God, telling people about the mighty deeds of God as recorded in the Scriptures. With one side of the sword we praise God with His Word, and with the other side of the sword our sins are exposed, and we expose the sins of others. Whenever you hear that Word proclaimed or whenever you proclaim it to others, God is at work.

This whole Psalm is that two-edged sword. With the sword of the Spirit we praise God, and with the same sword of the Spirit vengeance is executed on the nations and punishments on the people. Nowadays the words vengeance and punishment evoke negative feelings in our society, and so we need to look at verses seven through nine Biblically. The word "punishment" is also translated as "reprove" or "correct". The Bible uses it this way: "The LORD reproves him whom He loves, as a father the son in whom he delights" (Proverbs 3:12). Thus the Lord's discipline reveals not wickedness but His love for us.

All things work together for the good of those who love God, even His chastisements. They are evidence of His Fatherly love and are intended to make right what has gone wrong in our lives. They shepherd us to Christ crucified, in whom we find forgiveness and life.

Salvation and judgment are joined together throughout Scripture, and most importantly in Jesus as He was judged for our sins and raised for our salvation. Therefore, we can say with the psalmist, "Praise the Lord!", because when we interpret Scripture in the light of Christ, we can see that even in God's judgments there is mercy, and even in His chastisements there is grace to strengthen our faith and renew our lives! Amen.