

At all times? (Psalm 34:1-8, 19-22)

This psalm is hard to take.

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"I will Bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth."

Before the preacher can even continue the verse, excitement begins to rise in the congregation in anticipation of what comes next. Now the majority of the congregation joins in: "My soul shall make its boast in the Lord, the humble shall hear of it and be glad." By now, one can feel the frenzy that W. E. B. Du Bois wrote about beginning to take shape as a boisterous and communal "Oh Magnify the Lord with me, and let *us* exalt his name together!" reverberates through the sanctuary. The stage has been set for preaching, as both proclaimer and congregation are primed for a moment of revelation.

I can't read this psalm without invoking this pre-sermonic moment that I've witnessed time and time again. One of my favorite guest preachers would always recite this psalm before he preached, creating the kind of celebratory moment that I just described. This psalm lends itself to that kind of atmosphere. What excitement and evocative language in this beautiful psalm about God's protection and presence with us! It is an exuberant psalm, calling for the people to bless God's name together, and to do so at all times.

But as exciting as it is, there is something of a tension present in an exhortation to bless the Lord at all times. A call for constant and continual praise might sometimes feel like too much. At all times—*all times*? When a pandemic is raging all around and the frustration of its continuation is wearing on our collective psyche? At all times?

When something as basic and foundational as voting rights seem to be under attack? At all times? When people are losing jobs and unable to pay their rent? At all times?

In such a context, the vigorous exhortation to praise can feel out of place. But here's where the setting for this psalm offers some helpful context.

David writes this in response to his Oscar-winning performance in front of Abimelech. God delivers David from Abimelech because David is able to act, colloquially speaking, crazy: there is a disconnect between his behavior and its cause. David flails around for no reason, and Abimelech lets him go. "I will bless the Lord at all times," writes David.

Now on the one hand this makes sense. Of course David is feeling the need to give God constant praise for delivering him yet again from certain disaster. But more than that, David is calling for a "crazy" kind of praise—one that matches the disconnect of his acting performance. To bless the Lord at all times is crazy, because sometimes life comes at us in such a way that praise does not seem like the appropriate response. But David's encouragement is to bless the Lord anyway.

And in blessing the Lord we are reminded of God's protection and comfort. Our hope is restored when we make the intentional choice to bless God and magnify God's name. All of the promises of protection are renewed in us when we make the choice to praise.

This psalm then becomes a way for the community to encourage itself in the face of sometimes disastrous circumstances. When the community testifies that they have tasted and seen that the Lord is good, they are reminding themselves of what God has done and finding the strength to hope in light of anything that is going on around them.

On second thought, maybe praising God at all times isn't so crazy after all.