Acrostics

Psalm 111, 112 Kimby Young

Not read - Psalm 9, 10, 25, 34, 37, 119, 145 July 9, 2023

The psalms for today are all acrostic poems in the Hebrew. They all use the Hebrew alphabet to express praise for God – going a to z – or better said aleph to tav in Hebrew. Because the words are different in English than in Hebrew, we lose some of the beauty of the poetry. It is also sometimes hard to see the themes and meanings of each psalm. Because sometimes the flow is a little forced by the alphabet. We know of 9 acrostic psalms that use the entire Hebrew alphabet. They are listed in the bulletin. There are also a few that use part of the alphabet or that spell out words in Hebrew like we did in the children’s time. I chose Psalms 111 and 112 to use for the simplest and silliest of reasons – they are the shortest of the full acrostics. Both of these Psalms use very short phrases for each of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet – half lines for each letter of the alphabet. The first verse contains the first two letters in Hebrew – aleph and bet. And so on – two letters for each verse thru verse 8. Then verses 9 and 10 include three Hebrew letter phrases each.

Psalms 111 and 112 are partner Psalms. They are called a diptych – they belong together. They are written by the same person at probably the same time. They are meant to be read together. Each Psalm helps interpret the other. Psalm 111 praises God for all that God does. Psalm 112 commends those who honor God. The last verse of the first Psalm announces the theme of the second. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practice it have a good understanding. God’s praise endures forever.” Following that verse, the second Psalm expands on the life of someone who honors God. The fact that the second Psalm depends on the first is more than just a literary device – it is a theological statement. The second theme – human devotion to God, depends on the first theme – who God is and all that God does. God comes first. Human response follows. Human wisdom and blessing – the subject of the second Psalm – is dependent on the good work of God – the subject of the first Psalm. Because God is who God is, we are blessed. Because God is who God is, we have a path for full and abundant life.

The most famous of the Acrostic Psalms is Psalm 119. We only read one verse of that Psalm because it is 176 verses long. It not only follows the Hebrew alphabet – it offers 8 lines each for each of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. It is an absolutely amazing piece of art and poetry and praise. The theme of the whole is reflected in the one verse we read today – thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. Psalm 119 is 176 verses all about how wonderful fantastic important and inspiring God’s Word or Law or Torah is. It is obviously written by a devoted follower of Yahweh God – many think perhaps a priest of the temple in Jerusalem. It makes you wonder if you could right something like this. In fact several years ago I preached a sermon on Psalm 119 and I challenged you to try an acrostic about God. I handed out random letters to everyone in the congregation and you turned in little poems, prayers and phrases about God. There are copies out in the narthex of the First Presbyterian Church of Gardner’s A to Z praise of God. From adoration to zealous love. Whoever wrote Psalm 119 spent a lot of time expressing their faith and trying to encourage others to follow God.

All of the other acrostic Psalms listed in the bulletin that we did not read - Psalms 9, 10, 25, 34, 37 and 145 – all have widely varying themes and topics. Three of them are laments expressing personal distress and asking for God’s intervention. Two of them seem to be for use in some kind of festival ceremony. So really any theme goes; what ties acrostics together is the use of the alphabet as a pattern for order.

I think that idea of “order” reflects the real point of all the acrostics. They were all written by faithful people who like order and structure, organized thoughtful people who wanted to express their faithfulness in a careful way. Part of that faithfulness is the belief that God brings order out of chaos, and following a disciplined pattern in life helps us to be faithful. For some people trying to write an acrostic poem or prayer would be too rigid. It would restrict their creativity and expression. For others, the very strictness of the structure is what moves that person to faithfulness – helps that person to draw closer to God. In other words, acrostics are not for everyone. But for a logical ordered mathematical scientific mind – the very boundaries of the acrostic provide blessing. I think of Bill Webb who would probably have loved the challenge of an acrostic. Or my brother in law. Maybe you know someone else who would love this pattern – maybe it’s you.

The point that dawned on me while writing this sermon is that the Psalms offer something for everyone. God indeed, offers something for everyone. God loves diversity of expression, different ways of living our faithfulness. God welcomes all of our creativity and praise – even if it is not the perfection of a 176 verses in a pattern. Even if it is one verse, one voice sharing Alleluia – Praise the Lord. God loves our offerings of faith in any form. The point is praise God – here and now, at home and in your work. Praise God any way you are able, every way you see fit. Praise God. Praise God with the words we use and the air that we breathe. Find a way to praise God, so that others may see your faithfulness and be inspired to praise God in their own lives. Praise God. And may you be abundantly blessed.