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**Psalm 113:1–8, New International Version.**

<sup>1</sup> *Praise the LORD.*

*Praise the LORD, you his servants;  
praise the name of the LORD.*

<sup>2</sup> *Let the name of the LORD be praised,  
both now and forevermore.*

<sup>3</sup> *From the rising of the sun to the place where it sets,  
the name of the LORD is to be praised.*

<sup>4</sup> *The LORD is exalted over all the nations,  
his glory above the heavens.*

<sup>5</sup> *Who is like the LORD our God,  
the One who sits enthroned on high,*

<sup>6</sup> *who stoops down to look  
on the heavens and the earth?*

<sup>7</sup> *He raises the poor from the dust  
and lifts the needy from the ash heap,*

<sup>8</sup> *to make them sit with princes,  
with the princes of his people.*

<sup>9</sup> *He settles the childless woman in her home  
as a happy mother of children.*

*Praise the LORD.*

**A God who both is high and low.**

I won't be trying to tell a compelling personal story this week, like I often do. I also will not end with a prayer. I want to save my time up here to make a point that I think is very important in today's Christian Church. Let me start with arguably the most well-known prophet, a spokesperson for God who served during a time when

the Assyrian Empire ruled most of the Middle East and held brutal control over Israel. In Chapter 6 of Isaiah, the prophet receives his call from God to serve. Isaiah speaks for himself when he says: <sup>8</sup> *And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here I am! Send me.”* Isaiah then has a vision of God. With this vision, Isaiah impresses us with the magnificence of the God who has just commissioned him to serve in a truly amazing capacity. Isaiah describes what he sees as he stands before God: *In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. <sup>2</sup> Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. <sup>3</sup> And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” <sup>4</sup> And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. <sup>5</sup> And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”* We see that Isaiah is truly humbled by the magnificence of God. Compared to the God who will speak through him, Isaiah sees himself as unclean, as unworthy. Each of us would be stunned beyond comprehension at what was happening if we were to serve in the same role as Isaiah, the great prophet. But to Isaiah, he is nothing compared to God.

Let me move to the Book of Revelation. The author, John, who has been exiled to the Island of Patmos because he is a believer, evokes the same ancient Jewish scriptural vision of God. His words are very reminiscent of the words of Isaiah, when he describes what he sees when he is swept up into Heaven. God is sitting in a grand throne room. John wrote these words, from Chapter 4, eight hundred years after Isaiah wrote: *<sup>4</sup>Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones were twenty-four elders, clothed in white garments, with golden crowns on their heads. <sup>5</sup>From the throne came flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and before the throne were burning seven torches of fire, which are the seven spirits of God, <sup>6</sup>and before the throne there was as it were a sea of glass, like crystal.* We see that for the better part of a millennium, the view of God is consistent. God's magnificence is unworldly.

In the Christian faith, we are taught that God is grand, that God is the King of the cosmos. God doesn't need to warp drive around all of creation. God created all that exists - and God exists simultaneously everywhere. Indeed, the New Testament is consistent in mimicking the Old Testament imagery of our grand God, in large part to add legitimacy to Jesus in the minds of early Jewish Christians who were familiar with Jewish Scripture. We are to be awed by the kingly glory of God, by God's power and authority. God creates. God punishes. God regenerates and

God forgives. Thus Jesus can transform the most horrific sinner into the purest of humans. God can also cast a person into the blackness of Hades. Given this sort of power, Scripture can intimidate us into believing that God is the ultimate Hollywood celebrity, someone who lives in a completely different realm and wouldn't want to have anything to do with us. God walking into our home would be like Elvis Presley walking in. Not only would Elvis not want to waste his time with us, but Elvis isn't even among the Earthly living. This causes many non-Christians to see the Christian God as a self-indulgent, punitive, pompous celebrity.

The American population thinks that we worship the Old Testament God, which in part, is of course true. When we read the prophetic books, it seems that regular people cannot communicate with God and God certainly isn't interested in coming down to the level of regular people. Why else would God commission prophets to intercede between God and God's people? But a more subtle reading of the Old Testament shows us that God's relationship with people is far more personal than this. Further, Christ came to us with a message, one that reminds us that the God of the Old Testament Prophets will indeed talk to us. Elvis will ring our bell and step inside for coffee and a peanut butter and banana sandwich. But the New Testament God is in truth the same God as the Old Testament. The New Covenant brought to us by Jesus simply reminds us of who God really is, both grand

and humble. Jesus told us that we don't need prophets. Even the Old Testament indicates this. Later, in Chapter 43 of the Message translation, Isaiah speaks for God, stating that he, God, will comfort his people and lead them back from exile to their homeland: *3 Because I am God, your personal God, The Holy of Israel, your Savior.* In truth, Jesus' message was a shift in emphasis and not a story about an entirely new God. The prophets existed so that God could get the attention of people during particularly critical events, largely when the Israelites were becoming morally corrupt and drifting away from God. But God still speaks to individuals.

Our passage for today is the entirety of Psalm 113. It gives us a more personal view of God. It says that God lifts up those who have little. It starts out by saying that the servants of the Lord – that is, people like us, who are believers – are to praise God now and forever. To understand what comes next, note that the people of the time did not know about astronomy. The appearance of the sun was simply an inexplicable gift of God that happened every day. It came out of nowhere and then at the end of the day it vanished. And so, it's a very magical statement when the Psalm next says that from the wherever the sun comes in the morning to wherever it goes at night, we should praise God. That includes their entire known world as well as a seemingly infinite world they couldn't comprehend. Next, we are told that our God is higher and more important than anything else in existence;

yet our God stoops down to look upon the lowly Earth to take care of us. God lifts up the poor from the garbage dump and places them among princes. We are then told that God will take a childless woman and give her children; this is said to a people who view their progeny as their greatest earthly gift from God, the very definition of the survival of the faithful. So, we should praise the Lord with all our hearts and minds.

Consider the line *He settles the childless woman in her home as a happy mother of children*. Within the Israelite culture a woman who had no children had very little value to her larger family. This says that a woman who has lost her status because she has no children will be given children by God so that her status can be restored. Here is a passage from the middle of today's quote:

<sup>5</sup> *Who is like the LORD our God,  
the One who sits enthroned on high,  
<sup>6</sup> who stoops down to look  
on the heavens and the earth?  
<sup>7</sup> He raises the poor from the dust  
and lifts the needy from the ash heap,  
<sup>8</sup> to make them sit with princes,  
with the princes of his people.*

We are told that God <sup>6</sup> *stoops down to look on* us. This comes from the New International Version; note the use of the word, “stoops”. The English Standard version says that God will “look far down from the heavens to see earth”. The

Modern English Version simply says that God will “look down” upon us here on Earth. In truth, the original Hebrew says that God will “make low of himself”. The best English translation is probably the New King James, which says that God “humbles himself” to look after us. But out of context this still misses the true, subtle meaning of this verse. Keep in mind that just before this we are told that *“the LORD is exalted over all the nations, his glory above the heavens.”*<sup>5</sup> *Who is like the LORD our God, the One who sits enthroned on high.* Then the next verse, 6, says that God will “make low of himself”. The subtlety is that God is high and low at the same time. God isn’t someone who is way up there on a throne and only a prophet can help us contact him – and only under very special circumstances.

Rather, God is always both high and low. Consider Isaiah 40:10-11:

*<sup>10</sup> Behold, the Lord GOD comes with might,  
and his arm rules for him;*

*behold, his reward is with him,  
and his recompense before him.*

*<sup>11</sup> He will tend his flock like a shepherd;  
he will gather the lambs in his arms;*

*he will carry them in his bosom,  
and gently lead those that are with young.*

This says that God rules with a strong arm, but God will also gently carry his lambs in his arms, holding them close to keep them safe. Remember these words:

*<sup>5</sup> Who is like the LORD our God,  
the One who sits enthroned on high,*

*<sup>6</sup>who stoops down to look  
on the heavens and the earth?  
<sup>7</sup>He raises the poor from the dust  
and lifts the needy from the ash heap,  
<sup>8</sup>to make them sit with princes,  
with the princes of his people.*

Here is what I want to focus on today. The Protestant Reformation, when the monolithic Catholic Church fragmented, was the result of corruption in the Catholic Church. The clergy had become spoiled. They were greedy and lived lives of privilege. They stood above the people in the same way that the Old Testament God seemed to stand above the people of God. But with the Renaissance came a sense of empowerment among the growing middle class. They were more knowledgeable; they had more opportunities to seek economic prosperity. They began to resent the authoritarian control of kings and of the Church. Above all else, people rediscovered the personal God of both the Old and the New Testaments. We were reminded that God would indeed stoop down and lift us up. God would indeed walk with us through our lives on Earth.

The Protestant Reformation was 504 years ago, half of a millennium. I believe that we are entering into another critical age of transition. I won't call it a reformation. It is more of a redirection, a restart, a reboot. A primary reason why church attendance at mainline denominational churches has plummeted in recent

years has to do with the rediscovery of that personal God and the desire to focus on a God who is low and not a God who is high. The formal, ritualistic nature of church services, especially in its tendency for the service to be one-way, with the pastor talking, and the congregation simply following along with prepared prayers and ancient songs – this is something that young people tend to find alien. At the hospital I have met many, many people under the age of fifty who say they believe in God, who want me to pray with them, who know that when they pass away, there is a kingdom waiting for them. But they do not see that kingdom here and now in traditional churches. I think that in the future, churches will use technology to allow people to meet without coming together physically. Church will fit into the lives of busy, digitally based people. Believers will also, of course, meet in person. But no matter how we meet, we will be more interactive, we will talk about God and not depend on the pastor to tell us everything. We will discuss spiritual, ethncal, and moral issues that are important to us. We will pray together. We will be more like the very first churches, the ones that existed in the century after the life of Christ, when there was no formal clergy and no hierarchical church structure. Young people often see that formal structure as existing to reinforce that legalistic, domineering notion of an Old Testament God. Some young people are attracted to churches with no formality at all, churches

with loud bands and even louder preachers. I believe, however, that more intimated churches will prove to be what dominates in the long run.

In the months to come, I'd like to suggest that we spend time in our services talking, rather than everyone simply sitting in the pews and being largely passive. I don't want to make major changes to this service. I realize the value and the power of rituals and tradition. Please think about this. Let me know how you feel about adding a discussion period to the service. We would have to make minor changes to make time for this. But I would like everyone to be empowered to accept the God who stoops down and blesses us with a personal presence.

Amen.