

## A High and Holy Name

1<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Christmas; Series A

Psalm 148:7-14

*The Book Thief*, a recent book made film, takes place in Nazi Germany and centers on a fostered girl named Liesel. There is one point in the story when Liesel attends a Nazi book burning ceremony where she hears an officer giving a speech about the importance of cleansing from the German society all “immoral” and “indecent” thoughts through the burning of books. After the ceremony Liesel finds a book that survived the fire and takes it home. Here in this scene we see a stark contrast between how two different people handle the same words. For the Nazi officer the words of the rescued book were garbage, worthy only of being tossed aside and thrown away. For Liesel, however, the words of this book were worthy of being rescued and treasured.

The way that Liesel and that Nazi officer treated the same book are two distinct and opposite ways that we can treat a person and their name. Martin Luther reminds us in his meaning of the eighth commandment that we should “fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbor, betray him, slander him, or hurt his reputation, but defend him, speak well of him, and explain everything in the kindest way” (*Small Catechism*, “8<sup>th</sup> Commandment”). On the one hand, we may lift a person’s name high and speak well of their reputation, especially if we like that person or they are nice to us. One of the things I observed right away when I was Called to be the Pastor of Atonement was how well the members spoke of one another. I heard wonderful stories and compliments from some members about other members. What a way to honor another’s reputation and speak well of one another.

How hard it is for us, though, to honor another’s reputation and lift high their name when that person says something we don’t like, acts in a way that causes us to disagree, or speaks in a tone that seems cold and harsh. In those moments how very easy it is to toss aside and throw away that person’s name and reputation in a way that ultimately harms them and is very unloving. We justify our action by reasoning that they “had it coming” and were “getting what they deserved.” Even we as the people of God, in the same moment that we honor one person, praising and lifting high their name, we may find ourselves dishonoring another, disgracing and bringing low that person’s name.

In the Psalm that we read this morning, the Psalmist takes us on a journey of praise from heaven to earth. He takes us from heaven where the angels are offering praise down to earth where all creation cries out in praise. The name of the one who is receiving the praise is YHWH, the Lord, the maker and creator of the heavens and the earth. All creation is lifting high the name of YHWH. All of creation is praising God for being fearfully and wonderfully made by him.

After describing the praise of the angels, the Psalmist starts his descent toward earth. He points us to the sun and the moon and all the shining stars that praise him. The sea creatures, all deeps, fire and hail, snow and mist, stormy wind, the mountains, hills, the fruit trees, cedars, the beasts, all livestock, the creeping things, and all flying birds—all of it cries out in praise to God (148:3-10). According to the Psalmist, the final group of creation that cries out in praise is human beings. The Psalmist tells us that the kings of the earth and all peoples, the princes and all rulers of the earth, the young men and maidens together, the old men and the children all praise the Lord (148:11-12). Human beings are the last ones listed. Is this because they are the jewel of God’s creation? Is the Psalmist saving the best for last? Or are human beings

last on the list because as human beings, we are at times the last ones to truly praise God, to honor his name and lift it high?

On Sunday morning we gather for the Divine Service to lift God's name high. We lift the name of the Lord high in by beginning our service invoking it—the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. We lift the name of the Lord on high by confessing our sins to him and receiving his sure and certain Word of forgiveness. We praise his name in song, in prayer, in the reading, hearing, and preaching of his Holy Word, and in the partaking of the Lord himself in his Holy Supper. We lift the name of the Lord high getting to know our God more in Bible Studies on Sunday morning and throughout the week. Although we are the people of God that bring God's name high here on Sunday mornings and in Bible Studies, are there other times we bring the name of God low, even in ways we don't realize or intend?

Rather than calling upon our Lord's name in daily prayer and joining with our family in daily devotionals we may fill our day lifting other names high. Especially this time of year we spend our days lifting high the names of Macy's, Wall-Mart, and Target. On Sunday mornings around this time of year how difficult it is for the day not to be about our favorite NFL teams. We fill our time and our heads with the names and stories of celebrities and the like. Indeed, sometimes even we are the last to praise the name of our God and lift it high.

In our celebration of Christmas we remember that the high, holy name of God was enfleshed and incarnated. We call his name Jesus. In Jesus God's name is attached to a person. In Jesus God, the Father does the remarkable, mysterious thing of lifting his name high by bringing it low. In so doing, God made his name vulnerable—vulnerable to humiliation and shame. He made it possible for the world to drag it through the mud and categorize it in the category of blasphemers. But he also exalted his name in Jesus' resurrection. At Christ's Second coming every knee will bow at the name of Jesus and every tongue confess him as Lord. But YHWH did this for his entire creation, the heavens and the earth. He did this so that your name could be attached to his high and holy name. He did this so that he could baptize you with his name and declare you his child. In this way you have a place with those that are mentioned at the end of the Psalmist's words. You are part of his Israel. You are near and precious to him once again. Though you were low and separated from God now, because God brought his name low and exalted it here on Earth through Christ, you are brought high. You are called a saint. You are holy. You are a child of God. You are part of the Israel of God. He who left his home in heaven came near to you to bring you near to him.

As one who is forgiven in Jesus' name and empowered by the Spirit of God that rests upon Jesus, may you continue to form the habit of lifting God's name high and praising him. Let us do this not only in our daily prayers, and our devotionals, but also by honoring and lifting high God's creation. In the world where it is all too common to toss aside and drag through the mud the names and reputations of others, even our Triune God, let us join all creation to honor and treasure our God and his name. Let us do this so that we treasure and honor also the names and reputations of all those he created—our spouses, our children, our brothers and sisters, our grandparents, even that person who says something you don't like or acts in a way that causes you to disagree. For, our God wants to use you to exalt his name in their lives, even as he has given to you his high and holy name. Amen.