

In Hebrew the book that we call *Psalms* is called *Praises*, the final song in the book is a call for all to join in singing in our everyday lives—to sing to God our praises in the world. The psalms are not only meant for worship—rather they invite us to come to worship in order that we might sing the songs in our daily lives. That when we wallow neck deep in the hard-stuff of life, we are invited to sing songs for help: O Lord, you are my light and my salvation. When we experience the grace and joy of life, we are invited to sing songs of praise: Thank you God! When we are in a tough place and remember God’s presence, we are invited to say, “I trust you O God, you are with me.” And when we see God at work in the world, we are invited to point to God’s work and say, “everything that lives praise the Lord!”

For the last three weeks I have been leading Cottage Meetings and hearing stories of people singing the psalms in their lives. We had 5 Cottage Meetings of about 15 people sharing what they love about Peace, hearing about the proposed ministry plan and giving feedback on that plan. These meetings have been meaningful times where we talked about the hard, the joyous and God at work at Peace and in the world. **Peace Lutheran is small for our members and big for our community. We know and care about each other and our community across the street and across the globe.** This is who Peace is and who we seek to be. As we sing praises, ask God for help and trust God there are values that guide how we live out that vision. The ministry plan and values have been compiled by council and me after three years of listening to the congregation in cottage meetings, coffee conversations and the Church Assessment Tool:

1. Take Jesus’ message seriously—welcome people into a Jesus-centered way of life.
2. Empower people for ministry—especially young people.
3. Empathize with people—instead of judging, step into their shoes.
4. Fuel a warm community—aim for warm peer and intergenerational friendships.

5. Prioritize young people (and families) everywhere—look for creative ways to tangibly support, resource and involve them in all facets of the congregation.
6. Be the best neighbors—enable people to neighbor well locally and globally.

These values have been part of the fabric of Peace but sometimes not clearly identified or talked about, so you will hear me preaching about these and lifting them up especially starting in September. After some tweaking based on the feedback from Cottage Meetings; the ministry plan will be rolled out in the August newsletter and in a forum on Sunday, August 6.

The psalms invite us to sing God’s songs in our daily lives and in the Cottage Meetings people talked about how they value connecting faith and daily life. Last Tuesday was the 241st birthday of the United States of America and what does it mean for us to live a Jesus-centered life in America? Tuesday was also the 131 birthday of the Statue of Liberty. What would Lady Liberty say to us on the anniversary of our independence?

First, Lady Liberty would remind us that the first Europeans in America intended we would be a nation dedicated to praising God. The first European settlement, April 1607, in Jamestown, Virginia was dedicated to God. In fact, their first act after landing was to put up a large cross and hold worship. The first two universities in the US, Harvard 1636 and College of William and Mary 1693, were dedicated to training people for Christian ministry. In 1836 a French statesman said, “America is great because America is good. America is good because her churches are great. Each week, her pulpits are aflame, and boldly proclaim the word of God. If America ever ceases to be good... she will cease to be great.” Words for us to daily remember.

Second, Lady Liberty would remind us that is United States of America is not God’s chosen nation—we are not the new Israel. There is often a sense amongst people of faith in the US that our land

has received an extra measure of God's grace, that we are God's chosen nation, like ancient Israel was. These are tempting thoughts that can lead us to think we are immune from God's judgment—that we can do what we please. This is what happened with ancient Israel, they thought they were above judgement and could never be defeated, but in 721 BC the Northern Kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians and in 587 BC the Southern Kingdom of Judah fell to Babylon. Every major empire has collapsed from within. People of faith in America are called to remind our nation that we are blessed to be a blessing to others, not to glorify our selves.

Third, Lady Liberty would remind us that people of faith must oppose injustice everywhere and be the moral conscience of the nation. The Bible is absolutely clear, Christians are expected to be model citizens: to vote, to be good stewards of the Earth, to care for the poor and to take stands justice all over the globe. The Statue of Liberty was a gift from France to the United States of America. We are neighbors near and far of different cultures and beliefs- yet neighbors still. We are in this together.

The Statue of Liberty stands as a reminder for all people but particularly for us a people seeking to live a Jesus-centered life, who take seriously the message of Jesus and the extreme grace that he gives to all and invites us to live out. We are blessed, as Americans, with a heritage that aspires to love the “tired, poor, the huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” Yes we are blessed. We are blessed as part of this great nation. As Christians we are blessed with the no-strings-attached love of Jesus. It is Jesus' love that is our out stretched arms that welcome and care for all for whom Jesus cares. Here I am Lord send me. Here we are Lord, Peace Lutheran Church, send us! Amen.