Psalm 111 is not a voice-over by a paid performer. There is nothing fake about this person. He is real, he is impressed, and he wants to tell us, sell us, and ask us to buy into the notion that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is the One, True God who saves. So, what does he say? Praise the Lord! The first three words summarize the entire song: “Praise the Lord!” Or literally: *hal-lu-yah*. Hallelujah!

This psalm is a praise song to God, a point Will Willimon makes in a sermon on this psalm. The psalm is all about God, he observes. It is not about us. This is the essence of worship. We might have enormous stress during the week, we might have family problems, we might have issues with the boss, or we may need to lose weight; but when we come together to worship, it is all about God, not us.

“Praise the Lord!” Verse 1 is the writer’sthesis statement, which he follows up with an *assertion, examples* to support the assertion,and finally, the *logical conclusion* or outcome which is his call to action. We are going to look at each of these sections (briefly!).

**Thesis statement.** “Praise the Lord! I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, in the company of the upright, in the congregation” (v. 1). This verse describes what the writer intends to do. He is going to praise the Lord.

**Assertion.** The writer contends that the “works of the Lord” are great and people who love God’s work study them, examine them in detail. They look at every aspect of the works of God, deconstruct them, analyze them, conjecture, hypothesize, extol, and rhapsodize. They are in shock and awe (v. 2).

Then, he argues that these creative wonders project the honor and majesty of their Creator and that God’s marvelous deeds earn God a well-deserved reputation: Ours is a God of enduring righteousness, and moreover, a God who is “gracious and merciful.” The writer asserts that *God is a God of “wonderful deeds” (v. 4), that are clothed in grace and mercy.*

**Examples to support the assertion.** The writer provides examples to support his contention that God is a God of “wonderful deeds” which are clothed in grace and mercy. God provided food, he writes, a reference to the Israelites’ experience in the wilderness when manna and quail sustained them for many years. God also provided water in the desert, which is nothing short of amazing! God kept covenant with them, a covenant that began with Abraham and was renewed at Sinai. God’s works were very public, so neighboring nations learned of the great God of the Hebrews. God is faithful, just, and trustworthy, a reference not only to how God delivered the Israelites time and again, but to the Mosaic law that codified the righteousness of God and the expectations God had for the people. And finally, God saved them, redeeming them from destruction. One has the sense that the psalmist could have kept on writing. Perhaps he kept it brief because he was running out of alphabet! Clearly, he had a lot of material with which to work.

Even if you had just *one*of these examples to support the contention that *God is a God of “wonderful deeds” (v. 4) that are clothed in grace and mercy,*it would be more than enough. But the writer goes further. He emphasizes the eternality of these wonderful attributes of God. The expression *ever* or *forever* appears five times in this short praise song. God’s righteousness endures *forever* (v. 3)*.* God is *ever* mindful of God’s covenant (v. 5). All God’s precepts are trustworthy (v. 8). They are established *forever and ever*. God commanded God’s covenant *forever* (v. 9)*.* God’s praise endures *forever* (v. 10).

Imagine the writer peering into the TV camera and saying, “Take it from me! If you trust in God, you can be sure that God will keep covenant with you. God is forever, my friend. God doesn’t go back or take back, retract or redact, deny or dismiss!” *#WhatGodsaysgoes.*

**In conclusion.** Now the ancient, real-person scribe wraps things up. The conclusion he suggests to us should be obvious. The evidence is overwhelming: “Holy and awesome is God’s name” (v. 9). But this is *his* conclusion, not ours. In the final stanzas, he adds, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (v. 10). This fear is not a fraidy-cat kind of fear, not the knee-knocking fear we experience when speaking publicly or standing on a high place. This “fear” is respect and appreciation. The psalmist is saying, “If you are really smart, you will buy what I am selling. Choose it or lose it. Your call.” When you buy in, you will have a “good understanding.”

 This is what the ancient lyricist has to say. It is his testimony. He starts with “Praise the Lord!” and ends with, “God’s praise endures forever.” What is *your* testimony? If you were to send a 240-character tweet praising God, what would you say? (No cheating by copying Psalm 111.) What would *you,*the real person, say if asked to offer a “God endorsement” in a sound bite? Of course, you could start with “Praise the Lord!”, but then what?

If this is a difficult exercise, it might be a sign that we are not really engaged with or connected to God, and thus do not have the words to be real, honest, and authentic. What we say might sound fake, and people can easily spot fakes. In fact, this is one problem many of us have with “real people” commercials: sometimes the real people do not seem real.

We are called to be real people, not actors, in our relationships with God and with others. People are looking for real people, authentic people, not people who are showing off, not putting on airs of superiority or self-righteous hypocrisy. They want faithful people, compassionate people, helpful people, real people – not actors. We are called to be real people, not actors, in our work and our worship of God.

Prayer: Jehovah, please help me to faithfully serve you and care for other people. Do not let me practice eye-service (working only when others are watching) but let me be truthful in my work and worship. Help me to represent you faithfully before others. For in the name of Jesus Christ I pray. Amen.

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**Real People, Not Actors**

Sunday, January 31, 2021 Psalm 111

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Let’s say you’re watching television and up pops a commercial for mouthwash. The ad shows a woman leaning to pet her dog, and then the camera zooms in for a close-up of her teeth. Suddenly, we are aware that this woman has bad breath and diseased gums. Then, we also see in small print, but quite visible, “actor portrayal.”

We see this message because mouthwash companies have a hard time finding “real people” with diseased and ugly gums, who use their mouthwash, and who are willing to talk about it on TV. The actors in these portrayals want viewers to know, “Hey, I’m acting. My gums are fine. I sat through two hours of makeup to look this bad.”

On the other hand, some companies have no trouble finding “real people, not actors” to endorse their products, which is a win for the advertising companies. If consumers are convinced that the person in love with this new herbal, eco-friendly shampoo is a real, average middle-class person, we will try it and buy it. We are more likely to plunk down our hard-earned cash if someone “just like us” loves this shampoo.

This is called social realism. We are more likely to believe someone if they look and dress and talk like us. Which is why most people, according to a recent survey, prefer real people over actors in commercials. It just feels more authentic.

The writer of today’s psalm is a real person, like us. He is not a professional troubadour hired to sing praise to God; this guy is the real deal. And the song! This is not just some rambling text; this psalm is a work of art! The song has 22 phrases (excluding verse 1a), each beginning with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. In just 175 words, the singer summarizes the whole history of God’s deliverance of ancient Israel as his poetic homage to the Lord!