

Praising the God Who Saves

February 9, 2003

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passage – Psalms 103:1-5 (NRSV)

- ¹Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and all that is within me,
bless his holy name.
- ²Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and do not forget all his benefits—
- ³who forgives all your iniquity,
who heals all your diseases,
- ⁴who redeems your life from the Pit,
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,
- ⁵who satisfies you with good as long as you live
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

Psalms?

What do we make of the Psalms? In a recent book, Philip Yancey¹ confesses that for much of his life he had little use for the Psalms. He saw Christians around him use the Psalms as some sort of spiritual medicine cabinet – “depressed? read Psalm 37; failing health? read Psalm 121.” This was an approach that never worked for him. He always seemed to land on the wrong sort of Psalm! Yancey came to realize that he was approaching the Psalms the same way he approached Paul's letters or the stories of the Old Testament. But the Psalms are different.

All of the Bible – the stories, the histories, the letters, the poems, the proverbs, all of it – is God's word for the people of God, as we proclaim each time scripture is read during worship at St. Andrew. But the Bible is *also* the spiritual journal of God's people. It is our story of our relationship with God – all the hopes, all the troubles, all the joys, and all the disappointments. You can best appreciate the Psalms if you think of each one as a mini-spiritual journal, a letter written by one of God's children. Thus, the Psalms reflect the full range of human emotions. Sometimes the psalmist (the journal writer!) is filled with boundless joy, but at other times the psalmist is sad or angry. It is all here. To get some sense of what I mean, read Psalm 22 (“My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”) and then Psalm 23 (“The Lord is my shepherd”). Could there be a stronger contrast? Here is another example. Read Psalm 102 (“my bones burn like glowing embers”) and then read Psalm 103, from which today's scripture is taken. Psalm 103 is a majestic hymn of praise without even a hint of darkness.

It surprises many Christians to learn that the New Testament writers quoted more from the Book of Psalms than from any other Old Testament book. But, like them, we need to make

The Book of Psalms

Psalms is a book of Hebrew poetry compiled over many centuries. Some Psalms are emotional, others are instructive. Some sing words of praise, others are songs of lament or even anger. I love Philip Yancey's description of the Psalms as “spirituality in every key.” He means that every emotion you will ever have in your own walk with God can be found in these ancient poems. They express our deepest yearnings and hopes. David, the boy shepherd who went on to be Israel's greatest king, wrote many of the Psalms. The Bible tells us that David “was a man after God's own heart” and his Psalms take us inside David's heart. Sometimes David can hardly contain the joy he feels in his relationship with God. Yet, at other times, he can hardly contain his sadness at the depth of his own sin. Such are the Psalms. Reading them is to take a journey of the human heart. These are Israel's prayers and ours.

¹ There is an excellent chapter on the Psalms in Philip Yancey's book, *The Bible Jesus Read*. I've read several of Yancey's books and I can enthusiastically recommend them all. He is a thoughtful Christian and a skilled writer.

these ancient Hebrew prayers our own. Yancey writes, “Psalms, located in the exact center of the Bible, gives us a comprehensive record of life with God through individually fashioned accounts of how the spiritual life works. I come to the psalms not primarily as a student wanting knowledge, but rather as a fellow pilgrim wanting to acquire relationship.”

The God-Who-Acts!

Christianity is not a philosophical religion; rather, we proclaim belief in a God who acts ~ who saves and forgives and redeems and heals. For Christians, God’s great act of salvation is Jesus Christ on the cross. For the ancient Hebrews, the writers of the psalms, God’s great act of salvation was their deliverance from slavery in Egypt, the Exodus. Psalm 103, from which today’s scripture is taken, is one of many praise Psalms, nearly all of which incorporate communal praise and thanksgiving for God’s deliverance of his people. The psalmist praises God for the many benefits bestowed on him, on God’s covenant people, and on all creation.²

In the opening verses of this Psalm, the psalmist begins by urging himself to praise God with all his soul and his inmost being. He has in mind 100% commitment to the act of giving thanks! I don’t know about you, but I can have trouble getting 100% focused on anything. The Psalmist prays here for the ability to shed all the moment-to-moment concerns of life and center his attention completely on God. Christians often express frustration with their inability to hear God’s voice. Perhaps a simple prayer like this one would help us to get quiet, focus on God, and develop a true one-on-one conversation. Frederica Mathewes-Green recently wrote in the Dallas Morning News³ that the Orthodox say, “Lord, have mercy” forty times, not because it might take God that long to hear the prayer, but because it takes us that long to mean it!

The Poetry of the Psalms

Hebrew poetry is characterized by *rhythm of thought or sound*. Today’s passage illustrates rhythm of thought. In v. 1, “soul” and “all that is within me” are synonyms. The poet is simply making his point one way and then immediately makes it in another way. The second thought parallels the first. Here is another example. In v.3-5, the poet uses parallel parts of speech: “forgives . . . heals . . . redeems . . . crowns . . . satisfies” – all verbs!

The poets used a variety of techniques to create a *rhythm of sound* in their poems. Some of the Psalms are acrostics, in which the first letters of succeeding lines or stanzas spell out the alphabet, a word, or a phrase. Sometimes the poets used alliteration, in which each word begins with the same consonant. The poets also used a lot of word plays. Unfortunately, nearly all of this is lost when the Hebrew is translated into another language. Many commentaries on the Psalms can help you see the poet’s art.

In verses 3-5 of this Psalm, the Psalmist praises God for his goodness to individuals. Here, we see the God-who-acts ~ who forgives, heals, redeems, crowns, and satisfies. The Psalmist praises a God whose love is not just a feeling or a belief – this is a God whose love is expressed in action!

When you read these verses about God’s actions, bear in mind that this is not a theological exposition. Rather, the Psalmist is expressing his complete and unbounded praise for all God does. For example, in v. 3, the Psalmist isn’t making some sort of claim that God will heal all physical disease among God’s people. It may be that the Psalmist is using “disease” as a metaphor for sin and brokenness, echoing the first line of the verse. It may also be that the psalmist is simply expressing his exuberant confidence in the LORD’s love and sheltering care. Remember, this is poetry and needs to be read as such. It is a mistake to rip lines of poetry out of their context and use them to try to make some theological point.

Next Week

Next week, we will begin a sermon series on some of Jesus’ parables. The parables are stories Jesus told in order to teach about his ministry and God’s kingdom.

² Much of my presentation of this Psalm comes from Willem VanGeren’s commentary in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Zondervan, 1991.

³ This is from a column by Ms. Mathewes-Green in the Feb 1, 2003, Religion section of the Dallas Morning News. The Religion section can be found in the paper every Saturday. It is excellent and usually has several articles worth reading.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Day 1 Psalms 9 & 10 (really a single psalm of thanksgiving and lament, an acrostic)	Day 2 Psalms 22 & 23
Day 3 Psalms 102 & 103	Day 4 Psalm 119:1-16 and 169-176 (the longest Psalm and an elaborate acrostic)
Day 5 Psalm 71	Weekly Prayer Concerns

Sermon Notes

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. In the opening verse of Psalm 103, the writer prays that he will be able to praise God with all his soul, his inmost being. Most of us have difficulty focusing on our relationship with God. This is why Dallas Willard says that if we want to hear God, we must listen for the “still, small voice” and shut out its rivals. The obvious question is how we do this. Make a list of five concrete ways we can shut out the noise of life and concentrate on our conversation with God.
2. The Psalmist praises a God who acts, whose love for us is expressed in concrete actions, not just in feelings or sentimentality. Thus, it shouldn’t surprise us that Christians are committed to a life of love in action. What does the phrase “love in action” mean to you? What does it tell us about the shape of the Christian life? A commitment to love in action underlies the United Methodist Church’s commitment to social justice. How do we express our own “love in action.” Will others see our love-in-action? When?
3. Psalm 103 is a hymn of praise. Though the words “thanks” or “thanksgiving” do not appear in these verses, praise and thanksgiving are bound together. The Psalmist can hardly contain his joy at the blessings done for him by his God. For what are you most thankful? Of the things for which you are thankful, what brings you the greatest joy? How would you express your own joy and thankfulness to God?