

“No Matter What”

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

March 15, 2009

Rev. Joyce Kirk-Moore

San Dimas Community Church United Church of Christ

Today the lectionary continues with selections from the Psalms as we move through the season of Lent. And this Psalm is fundamentally a Psalm of gratitude. But probably, and here I am assuming you think like me, which may not be true at all, we must debunk some long held theological assumptions. To do this we must first say very clearly that the Psalms are both poetry and hymns.

Our hymns are also poetry. Every week when I choose hymns I realize that the words, if taken literally, are not the words I might choose to say. For instance, “amazing grace...that saved a wretch like me.” Only in poetry would I use “wretch” to describe you and me. But *within* the genre of poetry “wretch” covers a “span of human conditions” which hopefully each person, coming from their place in the world, can touch the meaning of a God who saves us from what otherwise would be aimless existence. In our quest to be sure of things we really cannot be certain of, we sometimes want to make scripture into literal truth, as though it is always written in factual prose, and we don’t allow for the gospel truth which may come to us in poetry and metaphor. This is our problem; it was not the problem of those who wrote the Bible. They didn’t put all their “eggs in the one basket” of literalism. And literalism wasn’t a problem for the early church, or the Catholic church, or even the early Protestant church. It has only been emphasized as the “one true way” of interpreting scripture for about 200 years. But enough for church history. Now to the Psalm.

O give thanks to God, for God is good; for God’s steadfast love endures forever.

This verse sets the Psalm squarely in the category of praise and gratitude.

Let the redeemed of God say so, those whom God redeemed from trouble...

What does “redeemed” mean? Is it those who God determines “worthy?” Is it those who go to the “right” church or in this case temple? Is it those whom God has “chosen?” Do you remember P.E. classes in elementary school when two captains chose people for their teams. The really good athletes were chosen first and then, to the embarrassment of some of us, towards the very end we would be chosen. This is not what God’s redeemed means, for God loves “no matter what.”

The Hebrew scholar Robert Alter from UC Berkeley has explained “redeemed ones” is “not theological but political. These are people who have been redeemed from captivity or from dangerous enemies, ‘from the hand of the foe.’” (p.383) As a Christian community reading this text today, we need to be clear that “redeemed” does not mean just the people who have been sprinkled with holy water and proclaimed baptized. In high school I decided that I just couldn’t believe in a God who only redeemed the few people who were members of the “Church of Christ.” No one I knew was a better Christian than my best friend Betsy, who, for God’s sake, was a Methodist! God loves “no matter what.” Later I laid aside my own fears of “going to hell” and decided that my God had been too small, and that God could choose for God’s self who to redeem and that this could include nations and people to whom God spoke through various voices. This is God’s decision to make! All I know is that Jesus speaks to me and he is the voice of God guiding me in how to live and how to fulfill God’s purposes in my life.

Then we come to this verse:

Some were sick through their sinful ways, and because of their iniquities endured affliction;

Well, it is true that sometimes we do things that we know will make us sick--we eat too much of the wrong things, perhaps we drink or smoke or have a lifestyle that we know may lead to sickness. Our commerce and consumption may produce toxins or pollution that causes sickness.

But the church must be clear in saying that not everyone is sick because of sin. Years ago mental illnesses were often thought to be caused by sin; we know this is not true. While natural consequences follow certain behaviors, it is not true that all sickness is due to individual sin. If we look around us, we see many examples of people who are sick but who are some of the most faithful people we've ever known. This is why the church has a ministry to be a place of healing. Again, this Psalm is poetry. It is likely that it was sung in worship services by people who had been delivered from captivity in Babylon, people who were grateful, people who praised God because they were home again! "I once was lost but now I'm found."

Most of the text for today we don't have trouble with because it gives God glory for all that is good in the world. I have explained the verses that even us preachers have sometimes co-opted and used to preach whatever "doctrine" we want to espouse. Remember when some religious leaders blamed 9/11 or the tsunami of 2005, or hurricane Katrina on perceived sins of certain groups of people? We seem to want to lay blame or have an explanation for all the bad that happens. It strikes at the problem of "why bad things happen to good people" which is probably why there are a lot of good people who have given up on God altogether. Yet, it *is* possible to believe in God as the power and force for good and redemption and reconciliation without attributing to God the catastrophes that are part of the way of this world.

The Psalms give us opportunity to pour out our hearts to God; to give voice to both our anguish and our thanksgiving. It is not God who chooses some to be afflicted and only certain others to be redeemed, but it *is* God who is the giver of all that is good and right in this world of ours, and so we lift our grateful hearts in praise. This is a hymn of praise "no matter what" happens to us knowing that God loves us endlessly "no matter what" may befall us.

Walter Bruggemann invites us to "imagine a world without Psalm 107, a world where no one sang this song of thanks, of fidelity, of life that holds distress, of cries of pain that are heard by the Divine. Imagine a world totally silenced, no prayers uttered, no hopes voiced, no hosting of the human condition and, consequently, no miracles of newness or healing." (*Mandate to Difference: An Invitation to the Contemporary Church*) As church we share in voicing our cries of need and pain expecting to be heard not only by the community gathered but by the Holy One in our midst. And so within this refuge our hearts are broke open and suffering shared is suffering bearable. Those same broken hearts become hearts of gratitude from which we live our lives.

It is out of this depth of gratitude that we can transcend our smaller world and think of others and the deep needs in our world. Today we offer up to God those needs and our One Great Hour of Sharing Offering to help meet those needs. The first year Tom and I were married, we decided to let the girls help us decide what we should give to One Great Hour of Sharing. One of them suggested \$300; the other suggested \$50. We decided as a family to give \$250. It was the same daughter who suggested we give \$300 who a few years later, unbeknownst to me, emptied her piggy bank for the Easter offering. If the financial secretary hadn't told me, I would have never known. Sometimes children are great teachers of generosity and gratitude.

Kathleen Norris has written about her own learning of praying the Psalms. As she prays the Psalms poetic words, images arise that resonate with our life today. As poetry that lend themselves more to inspiration than analytical dissertation; they call us to a place slightly removed from the ordinariness of daily life so that we may reflect on their meaning for us today. Norris offers a lovely image for us, reminding us that the Hebrew word for praise not only means "praise" "but primarily means 'to radiate' or 'to reflect'". So today, may we be radiant for God, radiant in praising, radiant in our giving, radiant in our living. AMEN