

September 13, 2020
The 15th Sunday after Pentecost
Lectionary 24, Year A
Psalm 103:1-13
Emmanuel, Norwood, MA
Zoom Worship
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Blessings

On this day of when we have heard from some in our church about their favorite scripture verses, one of our readings today, our Psalm is arguably, my favorite Psalm. In my battered old Bible from college and seminary, Psalm 103 is circled and the word funeral is written next to it.

That's because it's the Psalm that I want to have read at my own funeral. But I didn't originally choose it for my funeral, I choose it for my grandmother, when I was on my way to her funeral in Ohio.

It was my junior year in college. I had a car at college, but my parents and sister had picked me up, so that we could drive together to my gather with the rest of my father's family for my Grandma Sera's funeral.

I sat in the backseat of the car, with my sister next to me pouring through the Psalms. Which one would say just the right thing, the thing that needed to be said, in this moment of loss, the death of my first grandparent that I had known?

My father's father had died before I was born. My mother's parents were still living. So, for me, my Grandma Sera who lived in Alliance, Ohio, she of the yellow brick house and the garden and the chicken noodle soup and the French toast, she who called my Dad, "Johnny", was my first experience of a death of a family member who I had known; who had played a significant part of my life.

There are 150 Psalms. It took me all the way to Psalm 103 before I found the right one.

*Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and all that is within me, bless God's holy name.
Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and forget not all God's benefits—
who forgives all your sins
and heals all your diseases;
who redeems your life from the grave (Psalm 103:1-4a)*

Perhaps it is a little strange that I thought that at Psalm that sings of healing would be perfect for a funeral, but to me, it made sense. In my mind, we weren't going to Ohio to acknowledge my grandmother's death or even to celebrate her life, although we would and did do both of those things.

To my way of thinking, we were going there to celebrate her resurrection, that her body, which had been suffering, had been released from long pain and weakness, declining energy in a person who as I remembered her, was always moving, that she had received a resurrected body, that she was healed of all of her diseases, that, joined by baptism to Christ's resurrection, she was redeemed from the grave, that her sins were forgiven, that she was given the promised crown of righteousness, that she lived in God's steadfast love, that, like an eagle rising from the earth on strong wings, she had broken free from the bondage of corruption and mortality and had risen in Christ. To me, it made perfect sense to talk about her healing, at her funeral.

We did not read Psalm 103 at my Grandma Sera's funeral. The funeral had already been planned by the time that we arrived. It had been well planned and it was very well done.

But still, Psalm 103 stayed with me. And during that car ride, I decided that it would be the Psalm that would be read at my own funeral. At least it would be if I had any say about it; if the notes that I have left for those who have responsibility

for organizing my funeral are followed. I want these words of praise and forgiveness and healing and hope spoken over my grave, in the spirit of words found in the funeral rite of the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer, “All of us go down to the dust, yet even at the grave we make our song, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia.”

Ever since that time, Psalm 103 has greeted me like a friend every time I have encountered it. It has visited me in musical settings of the Psalms, I have heard it read at the funerals of beloved church members as I have presided over their funerals, and it has come to me in the lectionary texts.

It’s a Psalm that comes up a lot in the lectionary text that we read on Sundays. It’s a Psalm that used in Lent one year, during the Sundays after Epiphany in another year, and during the Sundays after Pentecost in a couple of years.

Like today. Psalm 103, your pastor’s favorite Psalm. And today, as I do almost every time I encounter it, I am experiencing it like a gift.

I believe that it was chosen for this day because it goes along with the forgiveness theme of our Old Testament reading, where Joseph forgives his brothers, and our gospel reading, where Jesus answers Peter’s question about forgiveness by telling him that he must forgive 77 times and then tells him and us a parable about forgiveness. Psalm 103 has this to say about forgiveness:

*LORD, you are full of compassion and mercy,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love;
you will not always accuse us,
nor will you keep your anger forever.
You have not dealt with us according to our sins,
nor repaid us according to our iniquities.
For as the heavens are high above the earth,
so great is your steadfast love for those who fear you.
As far as the east is from the west,
so far have you removed our transgressions from us. (Psalm 103:8-12)*

That's why I think it's here on this day, so that as we struggle with the challenge of forgiving others, we can start from a place of remembering that we have been forgiven.

But this Psalm is very timely, not because of that or, at least, not just because of that, but because today, we have gone into something of a blessing frenzy in our liturgy. To say that we are blessing everything that moves today, would be an exaggeration, but we are doing a lot of blessing today.

We have spoken words of blessing over the children who will receive their Bibles from Emmanuel this week.

We have spoken words of blessing over our Sunday School program that will begin Sunday School in a very new way next Sunday. Today we have surrounded with our prayers and blessings the teachers, leaders, and students who are embarking on this Sunday School journey.

Finally, at the end of this worship service, we will lift up prayers and blessings for the school year that either just began or is about to begin for teachers, students, and school staff around our state.

We planned all of those things, all of those blessings, on this day for very practical reasons; the start of the school year, which dictates the start of the Sunday School year, and the need for the Sunday School students, who will be working at home this year having Zoom Sunday School classes, to have their own Bibles, at their reading level and at hand during Sunday School, guided our timing on all of this. We didn't even look at the scripture readings assigned for today when we chose this as our day to do all of this blessing.

But then, when I finally did look at the today's readings knowing the shape that our worship service would take today, what did I find, but my favorite Psalm, reminding me, reminding us to be people of blessing: "Bless the Lord, bless the Lord."

You know, one of the questions that I've gotten about scripture most often is based on this Psalm or at least based on the Psalms, where the exhortation to Bless the Lord is found 17 times. Five of those exhortations are found in Psalm 103. People have said to me, "I usually think of God blessing us. What does it mean for us to bless the Lord?"

As it says in this Psalm:

*Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and all that is within me, bless God's holy name.
Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and forget not all God's benefits— (Psalm 103:1-2)*

The word that is translated as "bless" in this psalm and in other places in the Psalms where we find the phrase "Bless the Lord" is a Hebrew word that means literally "to kneel" as in to kneel in worship. So, to "Bless the Lord," means to worship God and to praise God.

The words blessing and benediction are often used interchangeably. We talk about ending our worship services with a benediction, which means, literally, "Good word" and then we speak a blessing, like this:

The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord's face shine on you with grace and mercy. The Lord look upon you with favor and give you peace.

Those good words, are called the Aaronic or Priestly blessing. They're from Numbers 6:24-26. They are how Aaron and his sons, who were called to be the priests of the Israelites, were told to bless the people of Israel.

A benediction is a pronouncement of blessing, of good words that invoke and announce God's presence with someone or something.

So perhaps when we are called to bless the Lord, it also means that we are called to speak good words to and about God. That we are to praise God with our words, acknowledging God's presence in our lives, the gifts that God has given us,

the gifts that God has promised us, the joy of knowing that God is with us every moment of our lives.

And that we are to share experience with others, to bless the Lord with our good words, but speaking not just to God, but about God to others, acknowledging that we have seen the Lord, we have seen God at work in our lives and in our world, in the good times and even in the difficult times, giving us strength and courage to make it through one more day, reminding us that we are not alone, not lost, but found, not abandoned, but loved, not past saving, but redeemed.

And one of the ways for us to speak these good words about God is by blessing others. Like we're doing today. In blessing the children in our midst, who will receive their Bibles this week, in blessing the Sunday School program of our church, the teachers, the students, the families, in blessing the school year this year and every year, speaking words of blessing over teachers, students, principals, school nurses, cafeteria workers, bus drivers, aides, assistants, custodial workers, administrators, school boards and committees, and all other people who are involved in any way in the education of our community's children and young people, we are speaking about our trust that God is out there in the world, at work in our lives and in our communities. We are speaking our hope that into broken places of all of our human experiences God's holiness can and will flow, that healing is possible, that redemption is God's gift, that goodness can be found, experienced, lived.

In blessing others, with our words and our actions, we bless the Lord, because we are lifting up our confidence in God in the public sphere, our good words about God pour forth. We have not forgotten what God has done for us, we seek and see God's holiness in so many ways and places and we bless the Lord by acknowledging it, by naming it, by speaking our trust in it with our good words, words of blessing, words of hope, words of trust, words that say, God is here, God is with you, God is with us.

And no matter what, **no matter what**, we will acknowledge the Lord, will bless the Lord, will speak words of blessing over God's beloved creation, over children, over Bibles, over education, over homes, over animals, over backpacks, and laptops, we will join the faithful throughout history in saying, the Lord is here. You are holy, this is holy, we are standing on holy ground. We trust, we remember, we know. And so, we say:

Bless the LORD, O my soul,

and all that is within me, bless God's holy name.

Bless the LORD, O my soul,

and forget not all God's benefits— (Psalm 103:1-2) Amen.