

First Presbyterian Church  
"Through It All"  
Rev. Lou Nyiri  
September 17, 2023

Exodus 14:19-31 / Psalm 103:1-13

**Scripture**

Our Second Scripture reading comes from Psalm 103:1-13, let's lean in and listen to these words...

**Thanksgiving for God's Goodness** (*Psalm of David*)

- <sup>1</sup> Bless the Lord, O my soul,  
and all that is within me,  
bless his holy name.
- <sup>2</sup> Bless the Lord, O my soul,  
and do not forget all his benefits—
- <sup>3</sup> who forgives all your iniquity,  
who heals all your diseases,
- <sup>4</sup> who redeems your life from the Pit,  
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,
- <sup>5</sup> who satisfies you with good as long as you live<sup>[a]</sup>  
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.
- <sup>6</sup> The Lord works vindication  
and justice for all who are oppressed.
- <sup>7</sup> He made known his ways to Moses,  
his acts to the people of Israel.
- <sup>8</sup> The Lord is merciful and gracious,  
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
- <sup>9</sup> He will not always accuse,  
nor will he keep his anger forever.
- <sup>10</sup> He does not deal with us according to our sins  
nor repay us according to our iniquities.
- <sup>11</sup> For as the heavens are high above the earth,  
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;
- <sup>12</sup> as far as the east is from the west,  
so far he removes our transgressions from us.
- <sup>13</sup> As a father has compassion for his children,  
so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him.

*THE WORD OF THE LORD...*

**Let us pray:**

Come, O Holy Spirit, Come  
Come as the wind and cleanse  
Come as the fire and burn  
Come as the light and reveal

Convict us  
Convert us  
Consecrate us  
Until, we are wholly thine.

And, now, my prayer is simply this...that the words of my mouth and the words of all our hearts will be found pleasing and acceptable to You, for You are our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

### **Sermon**

We've all been there before...standing (metaphorically or literally) in front of some big thing wondering how we're going to get through it.

For the Israelites in our Exodus story, it was on a shoreline – the sea in front of them and an encroaching army behind them.

What were they going to do?

How were they going to avoid almost certain demise?

Then a way appeared before them – Moses raised his arms – waters parted revealing dry land – they moved forward – they embarked on the journey and made their way through.

As the Israelites come to the shores of this water, pursued by their oppressors, there is chaos ahead and chaos behind – they discover, like that line from Robert Frost's poem *A Servant to Servants*<sup>1</sup> – the only way out is through ... and God makes the way through.

As we've looked at Exodus through the lectionary readings these last three Sundays, it is good to remember that the Exodus stories are about God's presence and provision in the wilderness – it's not so much about the people as it is about the God who leads, provides and prepares the way through until they reach the promised land – in fact, the very name of the book Exodus in the Greek means "[the] way out."

Exodus 14's description of the Israelites' passing through the Red (or Reed) Sea is a defining moment in their narrative – one which becomes part of Israelites' communal memory. Memory is important for people of faith, as we learned last Sunday when the lectionary took us into the Passover ritual which Moses and Aaron gave to the people as their way to recall the steps which preceded their liberation out from under Pharaoh's oppressive rule.

It is a reminder for us as well that most defining moments in our lives require a sense of remembrance.

The ability to recall where we've been, where we are, and the steps it took to get from there to here.

It's about remembering our way through the defining moments of our lives.

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<sup>1</sup> For link to the poem: <https://www.poetryverse.com/robert-frost-poems/a-servant-to-servants>

According to Catholic priest and theologian Henri Nouwen, Christian remembering is, “a choice [that] can only be made on a firm basis of faith, hope, and love with the lived experience of God’s real and active presence in our lives.”<sup>2</sup>

The theologian and writer of Psalm 103 helps us recall this firm basis of faith, hope and love by helping us remember how God has been and is present within the community of faith...

The Psalmist writes that God is:

- ...merciful and gracious...(v.8) / ...compassionate...(v.13)

Those two words “merciful” and “compassionate” both derive from the same root word *raham* and, in its noun form, it means “womb.” God’s mercy and compassion for God’s children is likened to the love a mother feels for her yet-to-be-born child. A reminder for us that this God in whom we place our faith is the God who embraces, cares for and nurtures us – the God who loves us into being.

The Psalmist uses a myriad of poignant, life-giving verbs to describe God’s active presence among God’s gathered community.

In the Psalmist’s words, God:

- Forgives / heals / redeems / crowns / satisfies / works justice / makes known [God’s] ways

All of which come together to help form our identity found in the God we love – the God who first loved us – the God who promises to be with us as we make our way through life’s high and low points – remembering also that this presence is often seen in retrospect because when we’re in the middle of the chaos it’s often difficult to see how God is at work – and yet, we trust that God is still at work in the chaos.

If there’s one thing we learn in life it’s this: we aren’t guaranteed (by God or anyone else) that we will not face trials.

Now, I know, this statement is easy to make when we’re talking about someone else’s life.

What do we do when it’s about our life?

- What do we do when it’s happening to us or someone we love?
- What do we do when it’s us or someone we love who hangs up the phone and turns to face those gathered around and speaks the words of a diagnosis they’ve prayed not to hear?
- What do we do when it’s us or someone we love who goes into work and gets the news that they need to clean out their locker or their desk because while the company thanks them for these many years of service that due to the economy we need to downsize?
- What do we do when it’s us or someone we love who gets the news that a relationship they so dearly cherished and committed to through better or worse has suddenly taken a turn for the worse?
- What do we do when the chaos and seas are turbulent in our corner of the world?

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<sup>2</sup> From the back cover of *Worship and Spirituality* by Don Saliers, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, PA, 1984.

A Sunday School class often used the following opener as way for members bridge the gap between life and faith, each member was asked to answer or ponder the question, "Are you heading into a storm...Already in the middle of a storm...or Are you coming out of a storm?"

The key to this Sunday School class check-in, I believe, is learning how to lean-in ... lean-in to the people around us and the God who surrounds us all ... for, as we lean-in to the people around us, I believe, we begin to see more clearly the God who surrounds us ... the God who is present amid the chaos ...

I recall the story of a young mother who remarked how in the years following the death of their three-year-old child, "I didn't know God for many years. However, I knew God's people, the ones who surrounded me and cared for me and were with me."

Please do not misunderstand me – I am not discounting this young mother's experience – for her experience is real – it is authentic – it is true – it is faithful.

What I'm asking us to consider is how do we hold on until we pass through to the other side when we are better able to see hope and joy despite what's happening around us – even if our hope and joy are lived through the faith of the people around us until we can own our faith for ourselves.

It is about whispering to ourselves and praying on behalf of others until it becomes real: ...that somehow, someday, somewhere God will work within the circumstances we find ourselves.

...that while we don't know what the future holds, we know the one and place our trust and faith in the one who holds the future in the palm of His hands.

A man sat in worship praying after receiving Communion.  
He couldn't focus on the gift of the day.  
He couldn't focus on the sacrament.  
He was lost in a haze.

All he could focus on were his fears about the next few days.

Although the choir sang of God's presence with and favor for God's people, all he could focus on was the chaos surrounding his life.

Not finding the words to pray, he simply sat still and listened.

As the soprano descant soared above the choir, tears formed in his eyes.  
A voice within him spoke to his fears, "I am here."  
He found himself swept up into the numinous space filled by this infinite Other, One who lovingly spoke to him saying, "Do not fear. I will not fail you. I am with you. I treasure you."

He felt gratitude, hope, and even a sense of joy flow into his present moment from a mysterious world deeper and more wondrous than the one his mind had previously inhabited.

He came to understand the words of C.S. Lewis, "It is the very nature of joy which makes nonsense of our common distinction between having and wanting."

What we *have* before us may not always be what we *want*.

Yet, leaning-in to each other and the God who surrounds us – OR – leaning-in to each other until we can see the God who surrounds us, in this very act of leaning-in we hold onto hope and joy that:

...despite what goes on around us we are looked upon with favor by the God of the universe.

...despite what goes on around us we are treasured by God.

...despite what goes on around us God will not fail us.

Whether we are heading into a storm...already in the middle of a storm...or coming out of a storm, let's lean-in to one another, that together we will see the God who surrounds us.

Let's be *Everybody's Church*.

To God be the glory, this day, and forevermore.

Alleluia and Amen.