

First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, MI
"You Are Somebody"
Rev. Lou Nyiri
March 3, 2024 (Lent 3)

**Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22 (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)
Thanksgiving for Deliverance from Many Troubles**

¹ O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever.

² Let the redeemed of the Lord say so,
those he redeemed from trouble

³ and gathered in from the lands,
from the east and from the west,
from the north and from the south.

¹⁷ Some were sick through their sinful ways
and because of their iniquities endured affliction;

¹⁸ they loathed any kind of food,
and they drew near to the gates of death.

¹⁹ Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
and he saved them from their distress;

²⁰ he sent out his word and healed them
and delivered them from destruction.

²¹ Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love,
for his wonderful works to humankind.

²² And let them offer thanksgiving sacrifices
and tell of his deeds with songs of joy.

John 3:14-21 (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)

¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶ "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷ "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Those who believe in him are not condemned, but those who do not believe are condemned already because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰ For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹ But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

Let us Pray:

Come, O Holy Spirit, come.

Come as the fire and burn,

Come as the wind and cleanse,

Come as the light and reveal,

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

And now, Lord, 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

Before I ask a question, I offer a precautionary preface, if you are seated next to someone with whom you have a close relationship, please avoid the urge to pivot your head quickly after hearing the question.

Have you ever met a stubborn person?

Someone who if they put cabbage on a burger and couldn't bite through it – even though it were suggested they may have bought cabbage instead of lettuce and put said cabbage on the burger would not admit they bought cabbage instead of lettuce and opted to gnaw through the bite until the cabbage tore.

I'm not saying I know anyone who did that – though I will leave you with that image for just a moment.

Psalms 107's writer understood stubbornness.

It's not exactly clear in today's reading – it will become clear with some explanation.

Psalms 107:17, ¹⁷“Some were sick through their sinful ways and because of their iniquities endured affliction;”

There is a significant translation issue in this verse.

The NRSV (from which we read this passage this morning) changes the Hebrew word *'ewilim* “foolish” to *cholim* “sickly ones” – however, it does so without external textual support.

The NIV (New International Version) offers the straightforward translation, “Some became fools through their rebellious ways, and suffered affliction because of their iniquities.”

The NRSV's somewhat unnecessary correction obscures the theological point the stanza is trying to make: sometimes our sin (*missing the mark*) is that we are *stubbornly foolish*.

From which we might extrapolate the following, *our foolishness can lead to our own suffering*.

However, we are a people of hope – we are a people of faith – we are people who believe there is a way out – even from our own stubbornness.

The Psalmist knows this as well – and the Psalmist knows that it needs to be from some higher power beyond us who can break through the barriers we knowingly and unknowingly put up around us –

The Psalmist reports in verse 19, ¹⁹“Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and [the Lord] saved them from their distress;”

The beauty of the Psalmist's words is that there is no specific incantation or recitation one needs to say. All one needs do in modern parlance is: Sound the alarm – Pop the flare.

Whatever is equivalent to throwing your hands in the air and saying, “Lord, I tried it my way. Now, I’m going to try it your way.”

When the *foolishly sick ones*, according to the Psalmist, cried out to the Lord in their trouble – the Lord saved them from their distress. “²⁰[The Lord] sent out his word and healed them and delivered them from destruction.” (107:20)

That phrase *sent out his word (dabar)* is as enticing as it is mysterious. What does it mean for God to send out the *word*?

Similar phrases occur in a few other Psalms and once in Isaiah – each one in the context of the Lord’s sovereignty over creation.

Psalm 147:15-18,

“He sends out his command (‘imrah) to the earth;
his word runs swiftly.

¹⁶ He gives snow like wool;
he scatters frost like ashes.

¹⁷ He hurls down hail like crumbs—
who can stand before his cold?

¹⁸ He sends out his word (*dabar*) and melts them;
he makes his wind blow, and the waters flow.”

Psalm 148:7-8,

“Praise the Lord from the earth,
you sea monsters and all deeps,

⁸ fire and hail, snow and frost,
stormy wind fulfilling his command (*dabar*)!”

These phrases in Psalms 107, 147, 148 recall Genesis 1’s creation narrative, whereby God creates by speaking creation into being.

In Isaiah 55 (the subtitle of which is “An Invitation to Abundant Life”), the prophet likens God’s word to the rain that falls from heaven and does not return until it has accomplished the thing God intended it to do.¹

These phrases help us imagine what the Psalm writer means when writing, “[The Lord] sent out his word and healed them.”

The “word” most likely references God’s power to sustain creation from moment to moment.

The Lord speaks the word – and creation bursts into being.

The Lord speaks the word – and blizzards rage with snow and hail and wind.

The Lord speaks again – and snow and hail melt.

Psalm 107 recalls what it means to be on the journey of faith – it recalls how when the pilgrims who were sick – spoke a prayerful word – when those who were *stubbornly foolish* cried out to the Lord in their foolish suffering – the Lord spoke a word, and they were made whole.

¹ Isaiah 55:10-11, “For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, ¹¹so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”

At rock bottom – when all else looked bleak – when there appeared to be no way out – the Psalmist reminds God’s people that through nothing they could do on their own – they were somebodies – people whom God loves and redeems – not one and done – rather forever and for always.

“¹ O give thanks to the Lord,” Psalm 107 begins, “for [the Lord] is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.”

Psalm 107’s structure is akin to a sermon based on God’s *hesed* – God’s steadfast love. You may recall how *hesed* indicates God’s affection and care by reminding us that God’s people have claimed a “soft spot” in God’s heart. You may recall that *hesed* – God’s steadfast love – prompts God to have compassion for God’s people.

God’s steadfast love – *hesed* – makes each of us a somebody.

Lest we wonder if this is true – let us come back to God’s *Word* – namely, God’s word made flesh – Jesus the Christ – the one of whom John’s gospel writer puts it in John 1, “¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.”

The Word made flesh – incarnation – Jesus the Christ – the one of whom John declares in chapter 3,
“¹⁴ must be lifted up,

For Jesus to be lifted – according to John – it is about much more than just the cross – John’s Christology is fourfold – it is about Jesus’ birth, passion, resurrection and ascension – to be lifted up then – according to John’s gospel – means Jesus being lifted up on the cross in crucifixion / Jesus being lifted up from death in resurrection / Jesus being lifted up back into heaven in ascension.

Why must this *Word made flesh* be lifted up...

¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶ “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷ “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

God redeeming the creation (keeping in mind we are part of creation) / God breathing new life into creation / God empowering creation – so that all who believe may have eternal life.

And if you’re looking for a definition of eternal life, here it is, according to John 17:3, “And this is eternal life, that they may know you,” (Jesus is talking to God) “and they may know me.”²

If to know God then is eternal life, our John text this morning could be considered a text about knowing God.

² John 17:3, “And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.”

What do we know about God?

We know that God loved the world.

Everything God did in the promises – in the covenants – in steadfast love – were evidence to the world – all the blessings to some were for the many – the calling of one was for all – the Son was sent so folks would know that God loves us – that we belong...

...that even in our *stubborn foolishness* God **will not** separate from us³ – for “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

God chooses us –
God chooses you –
God chooses me –

You are / I am / We are somebodies because of God’s love!

Let me say that again, “You are somebody because God loves you!”

World renowned poet, Award winning author, civil rights activist Maya Angelou lived during some of America’s most tumultuous days.

While the odds of her success were stacked against her as both an African-American and as a woman, she faced her challenges courageously and lived a life that was a blessing to our nation and world.

Maya Angelou spoke of where her courage originated in an interview with the New Orleans newspaper *The Times Picayune*,

“It’s a wonderful thing to know that there is something greater than I am, and that is God...

When I found that I knew not only that there was God but that I was a child of God, when I understood that,

when I comprehended that,

more than that,

when I internalized that,

ingested that,

I became courageous.

I dared to do anything that was a good thing.

When I was asked to do something good, I often say yes, I’ll try, yes, I’ll do my best.

And part of that is believing, if God loves me,

~~if God made everything from leaves to seals and oak trees,~~
then **what** is it I can’t do?”⁴

You can hear Maya Angelou describe the moment in her life when God’s love for her came alive – eliciting both amazement and gratitude – Angelou was in a class and read the words to her

³ Or, “that even our stubborn foolishness will not separate us from God.”

⁴ <https://gospellightminute.wordpress.com/2014/06/01/glmx-197-maya-angelou-said-i-believe-jesus-christ-was-the-most-courageous-of-persons-because-he-dared-to-love/>

mentor Frederick Wilkerson – this is how Angelou tells it in a 2013 interview (I encourage you to listen to Maya Angelou tell of it in her own voice⁵):

“I read, ‘God loves me.’

And, he said, ‘Read it again.’

I said, ‘God loves me.’

He said, ‘Read it again.’ ... ‘Read it again.’

And finally, I said, ‘God. Loves. Me.’

Then after about a ten-second pause – moved with emotion, she finishes,

It still humbles me.

That this Force which made leaves and fleas,
And stars and rivers,
And you...(turning to the interviewer)

Loves me, Maya Angelou.

That’s why I’m who I am,
Yes, because God loves me,
And I’m amazed by it.
And grateful for it!”⁶

You are somebody whom God loves.

And that changes everything.

Amen.

⁵ https://youtu.be/G38OwXWp2oA?si=W-5QIRMmy-Sb_IC

⁶ <https://youtu.be/gwuAntPHGVM?si=8h6uaCeKeMzcfV2k>