

Bless the Lord: Psalm 103

Good morning, sisters and brothers in Christ. I'm thankful that we have come together in God's presence this morning. May our worship and our daily living honour Christ Jesus our Lord.

We heard the words of Psalm 100 this morning - the command to worship the Lord with joyful noise, with thanksgiving and praise, and to bless God's name.

This is what believers around the world strive to do. When Don and I we worked in Nigeria and then in Tanzania with Mennonite Central Committee, we always worshipped with African Christians wherever we lived.

Worship services frequently included 2 choirs, accompanied by traditional instruments. We were invited to raise our hands in order to thank God for the music we just heard. Then a praise band with their keyboard and guitars led congregational singing. Sometimes older women would stand and sing a kind of yodelling when the Spirit made their hearts glad. Frequently everyone danced up the aisle (although you were welcome to simply walk) to bring their offerings to the front.

In the midst of poverty, sickness, political unrest, tribal tensions, and personal problems, they understood that their lives were in God's hands. Every day they were very grateful to God for God's great love and goodness to them.

From Paraguay to Ethiopia to South Korea, youth are attracted to the gospel of Jesus Christ and then get involved in the church through the singing of and dancing to songs of praise for God's grace and love.

At cowboy church services that we've attended in Rabbit Lake, the pastor sings while playing his guitar, and after each song - whether sung by the congregation, by the pastor, or by guest musicians, the congregation claps.

And this morning, we've sung praises from the *Hymnal, Worship Book*, keeping the tradition of congregational singing.

This morning we will look at another psalm that calls us to bless God, that is, to give the Lord our praise and our thanks, to honour God's holy name. PSALM 103.

I invite your participation as I read it. Here and there, I will pause and signal you to say in unison, "Oh yes!" Please speak joyfully.

Read PSALM 103.

The last verse of Psalm 100 declared, "The Lord is good. His steadfast love endures for ever, and his faithfulness to all generations." This is what Psalm 103 is all about as well.

In a different psalm the writer asks, "Given who the Lord God is, who can declare all God's praise?" Since ancient times people who worship the Lord have tried to express their gratitude and praise. They often feel inadequate in doing so, because our words are so meager compared to our awe before God's greatness. That, however, is no reason to not sing, and pray, and speak with joy and gratitude for who God is and what God has done for all humanity.

In this psalm of praise, David answers that "who?" question. **David's first answer is. . . himself.** He says, "I should bless the Lord, and will do so with all of me - my soul, my intellect and emotions, my voice, my body, hands and feet."

This echoes the greatest commandment of God's covenant in Deuteronomy 6:5: "Love the Lord with all your heart and all your soul and all your might."

David commits himself to paying close attention to what God is doing, to remembering and thanking God.

Second, David speaks as part of the Children of Israel. In verse 7 he turns his focus away from himself, and says, "The Lord made known his ways to Moses." That is a reference to the Israelites. They are called to praise the Lord as a people. I imagine him looking around to his fellow worshipers and saying, "The Lord worked through Moses to liberate us when we were slaves in Egypt. And He continues to bring justice to all who are oppressed, even today. That's who God is and what God does."

So who should praise God? All of God's people! The whole community of faith together.

The 3rd answer to the "who?" question begins in verse 19. Now David acknowledges God as ruler over heaven and earth, the whole universe. Because of that, the whole army of God's mighty angels are called to bless the Lord. And then, David expands that to all of God's works of creation.

Luke tells us that angels obeyed God when they announced the birth of Jesus the Messiah. It seems that they just couldn't keep quiet, so a multitude of them burst into a joyful song of praise. To a shepherd audience, they sang, "Glory to God in the highest heaven. . . and on earth peace."

And in Revelations we see exuberant angels praising God again. This time they are joined by the entire court of heaven and all of the redeemed believers. This time they are worshipping Jesus, the crucified Lamb who ascended to heaven and is now seated on the throne of God. Their song of praise is loud and joyful: "Amen. Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God forever and ever. Amen."

David says with great fervour, "Let everything on heaven and earth, ... everything - angels, all of nature, and humanity - bless the Lord because He is Lord of all." And so our calling as followers of Jesus Christ is be witnesses of God's redeeming love with our words and actions that bring glory to God.

David gave five reasons for blessing God in a list of the benefits of God's grace that he had experienced.

Are any of you list makers? Raise your hand if you make lists to help you remember - tasks, or groceries, or birthdays, or prayer items, or questions, or something else. David does not want to forget that God has (1) forgiven all his sins, (2) healed him, (3) rescued him from death, (4) provided for his needs, and (5) given him strength each day.

Let's think about that list. He begins with God's forgiveness. In Psalm 32:5, David describes how God forgave him after he finally acknowledged his sin to God instead of hiding it. Immediately following that forgiveness was healing from illness and recovery from despair. Sin and sickness, despair and death are all part of our human condition - David had experienced that. He knows that his survival and well-being was entirely in God's hands.

So he pauses in his list making and declares that it is because of God's kindness and love that he has been restored.

David had been crowned king, and that was a God-ordained honour and responsibility. But to be lifted up, and given a crown of God's faithful love and tender mercy instead - that was both honouring and humbling! Instead of continuing with a bleak outlook on life, or to be degraded or put down by others, God gave David dignity and worth.

Then he adds two more items to his list. Each day God met his needs and gave renewed his strength. All these benefits are his *in* and *through* and *by* God's love. The Israelites knew that the eagle was a bird with a long life and thought perhaps that was because eagles became young again through the night. That's how God's spirit refreshed David's weary soul. That reminds us of the promise made by Isaiah the prophet, "Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint."

And the wonderful thing about David's list is that it describes the Lord's gracious benefits in our lives as well. Some versions of the Bible gives the list as you statements. God protects you and provides for you. Other versions make plural statements: God forgives us and heals us. God's faithful love and tender mercy "saturates" the world, carries our broken pieces, and restores us to His heart.

When you write your list of reasons to remember God's benefits, past and present, what do you include? If we forget God's amazing grace, it's easy to become lazy in our relationship with Jesus Christ, to focus entirely on ourselves and neglect to share the goodness of the Lord with others. What words will you speak, what songs do you sing, what prayers do you offer that bless God?

When David shifts his focus to his faith community, he reminds them of their history. When God commissioned Moses, God said, "My name is *I am who I am*. I am the One who is merciful and gracious. I am the One who is mighty to deliver my people."

God made himself known to his people when he delivered them from slavery in from Egypt, and when he provided for their needs in the wilderness (with water, manna and quail, and healing from deadly snake bites), and gave them strength each day. At Mt. Sinai, God was merciful when the Israelites turned away from God to worship the golden calf, the idol, they had made. They need to remember their history in order to remain faithful to the One who delivered them from oppression and forgave their sins.

Do any of you enjoy reading history in general, or Mennonite history or your family history? What stories of God's grace and mercy are part of that history?

Or consider your life as a congregation here at First Mennonite. Think of significant events, whether happy milestones or difficult times. How was God present at each event? What did you learn together, or individually, about God?

God's patience with the Israelites is our story as well. When our people grumbled or relied on our puny selves instead of on the Lord, God was still present as the great I AM who forgave and restored our people, our communities and families. The holy name and character of the Lord has not changed throughout human history. For that reason we are called to worship together and praise God.

You see, it's in our worship - in our songs and prayers, in the Scriptures we read and the sermons we hear - that we remember (review) our personal and corporate stories of faith. That's when we are reminded of God's forgiveness and mercy when we confess our sins. As we bow our heads in prayer, we receive God's gift of strength to live in new ways. We are refreshed by the Holy Spirit to love and serve the God whom we worship and adore.

In the centre of this psalm, David describes God's character as our reason for praise and obedience. He says, for example, that God's anger is not violent or vengeful, but always leads to actions that uphold and restore life. That's because God is merciful. That mercy is like a mother tenderly caring for her infant

God's forgiveness and love are without limit. Can you see to the farthest star in heaven? or measure the distance from east to west? Those distances are beyond our comprehension - even with the most advanced telescopes possible. That's how far away God takes our sin if we confess to Him. What a picture of forgiveness.

God is compassionate like a father who recognizes that his children are weak and vulnerable. We are made of dust and our lives are short. In sharp contrast, God's parental love lasts and lasts and lasts. There's that wonderful promise again: The steadfast love of the Lord endures forever.

Out of God's great and endless love for all humanity, "out of the heart of God's desire to forgive and to give," as Richard Foster describes it, "God set into motion the entire redemptive process." God sent His only Son, Jesus Christ, into the world to forgive us and give us a new life.

Our reasons for blessing and thanking and praising God - like the angels and all creation - are grounded in God's grace and goodness, that are made real in our lives through Christ Jesus. Praise God who reigns with power and love!

This praise psalm encourages all of us to respond to who God is and what God has done and is doing with worship, with faithfully following Christ, and with serving Him. Too forgive as we are forgiven, to care for those in need as God has cared for us, to join in God's work of peace, to care for God's creation, to bring encouragement and hope to the desolate, and to be patient with one another.

Closing prayer.