



Westminster Presbyterian Church

Sue Hamilton - April 30, 2017 Sermon

Eastertide: A Time to Bear Witness to God's Blessings

Psalm 116 - Psalms for Praying

In September, 1998, a game show launched in Great Britain that over the course of ensuing years was embraced internationally. Perhaps you will recall seeing an episode of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*, a game where contestants standing on a stage, try to outlast one another by answering more questions correctly than their opponents, thereby increasing their chance of winning a large pot of money. An interesting aspect of the show was the use of lifelines. As each round of questions increased in difficulty, lifelines offered a way for a contestant to get outside help for a question of which they were not sure of the answer. Offered in one of three ways: "50/50", in which the computer eliminated two of the incorrect answers; "Phone a Friend", in which the contestant makes a thirty-second call to one of a number of friends (who provide their phone numbers in advance) with the hope they will know the answer; and "Ask the Audience", in which audience members use touch pads to designate what they believe the correct answer to be, after which the percentage of the audience choosing each specific option is displayed to the contestant. Not surprisingly as technology increased, phone calls had to be eliminated with the easy access of search engines on smart phones and lap tops.

Lifelines, there would never be enough available for me to do well on any game show, but this notion of reaching out for help came to mind as I thought about the psalm for today. The reader is not aware of what has happened in the psalmist's life only that things have gotten tough, really tough. The NRSV describes the person encompassed in the snares of death, which can be understood in a literal sense, meaning that life is nearing its end, or metaphorically, as in the paraphrase of Psalm 116, read *from Psalms for Praying*, which states, "When the snares of fear encompass me, when the pangs of loneliness envelop me." Whatever the particular case was, the psalmist, in their suffering, cries out to God.

Centuries have passed and life has evolved but what haven't changed are common threads of emotional response, which is one reason why the psalms are so powerful. We know what it is like to feel afraid, and some of us, to be frightened for our physical life or the life of someone we love. And most of us, I would venture, have experienced the overwhelming avalanche of emotion that can result when life seems to be out of control, when pressures continue to mount, or when we feel powerless to change our circumstance. How we respond to such moments, however, differs. Some of us reach out easily and share what is going on in our lives while others prefer to hold thoughts and situations privately and perhaps wait to share till after some time has passed. Sometimes cries for help are immediate, a spontaneous reaction to an encountered difficulty, and at other times they

arise from challenges experienced over a period of time. We may be in touch with our need or longing and sometimes another will notice it first. But, whether we are aware of it or not, our bodies seem to know more than we do. When fearful, a physiological response kicks in, and in one way or another, we engage with what is hurting us, freeze, unable to do anything, at least for the moment, or flee, and remove ourselves from the situation.

Who knows how long the psalmists anguished in their struggle but at some point, fear finds voice. "I call upon you, my Rock," the cry goes out, and, as if in the next breath God's presence is already being felt, the response; "You come to my aid, Your strength upholds me."

Wouldn't it be great if calm always came that quickly? Experience tells us otherwise. More often than not, what happens is that our cries go out, audible or within the sacred silence of the soul, but readily are weighed down, by the powerful grip of thoughts or injustices of past hurts, weariness from fatigue or pain, or from the pull of on-going conversation that mills around in our head.

What makes a difference for this psalmist? With the risk of sounding simplistic, I think the answer is praise. Even in the midst of great difficulty the psalmist's trust in God is rooted in love, a love that is offered it would seem with each expression of prayer, captured poetically in the beginning verses; "Receive my love, O Beloved, You who hear my voice and my supplication. You incline your ear to me, and I call upon You with trust both day and night." Walter Brueggemann refers to psalms of thanksgiving as psalms of "new orientation." Difficulty exists, challenges that seek to threaten and choke out life, but God is about the work of blessings and the renewing of life. Offering praise helps to redirect one's focus.

Recognizing this, the psalmist responds; "Gracious are You, just and true; Heart of all hearts, You are merciful and forgiving. You preserve the simple; when I am humbled, You lift me up." There is a mystery that occurs in the offering of our cries and pleas. Whatever the struggle, as inadequacies are voiced, fears named or anger released, with their naming some of the hold they have upon us is lessened and the vulnerability that ensues makes way for receptivity and the possibility to see that God is both present and good. Answers may still be left to be lived into, but for now calm is restored, the beginning place of being able to see or experience life differently. Recognizing this gift the psalmist asks of its soul, "Return, O my soul, to your rest."

Rest is a common and daily human need but even more so when the waters of life are choppy. That is why the request to return is made, for the psalmist knows that it is God, the loving Friend, who is able to bestow grace upon grace, a balm for the soul. With renewed strength that brings him to his feet and with tears dried he trusts that his next steps will be directed by the Holy one. Grateful for this presence anticipated movement is witnessed, "Now, I walk hand in hand with Love in the land of the Awakened ones. I keep my faith, even in times of great turmoil; I invite others to Awaken to the joy of your Presence."

Does this sound sappy, a little too Pollyannaish? Maybe, unless one sees the practice of articulating blessing put into action. Late last week I received in the mail a book I had ordered, *The Cure for Sorrow, A Book of Blessings for Times of Grief*. Written by an author I enjoy, Jan Richardson, I did not think twice about ordering her new book. An artist and a writer, this book is a compilation of blessings written over many years. Included and intertwined throughout its three sections; Getting the News, The Sweetness That Remains and What Fire Comes to Sing in You, are blessings written in a three year span following the unexpected death of her husband at the age of 62, in December of 2013.

Jan writes; “At the time of Gary’s death I had been composing blessings for years. I have a persistent fascination with this ancient literary form that holds some of the most beautiful writings of the Jewish and Christian traditions....In the rending that came with Gary’s death, I continued to write blessings. As everything about my life changed, I wrote blessings still. Looking back, I sense I was searching for confirmation of what I had long believed about blessings. At the core of that belief lived the conviction that a blessing conveys God’s desire for our wholeness and that it holds the ability to open us to the presence of God in any circumstance.

Although we often equate blessings with God’s benevolence, thinking that they constitute a sign of God’s favor in the form of prosperity and abundance, they often work in ways quite contrary to such a notion. I have come to see with greater and greater clarity that a blessing is at its most potent in times of disaster, devastation, and loss. When God’s providence seems most difficult to find, a blessing helps us perceive the grace that threads through our lives.

A blessing does not explain away our loss or justify devastation. It does not make light of grief or provide a simple fix for the rending. It does not compel us to ‘move on.’ Instead, a blessing meets us in the place of our deepest loss. In that place, it offers us a glimpse of wholeness and claims that wholeness here and now. A blessing helps us to keep breathing—to abide this moment, and the next moment, and the one after that.”¹

I was struck by her words and her assessment, that though many of the blessings contained in this book were written before Gary died, their words offered continued solace to her on this side of his dying, a testament she believes to the ability of a blessing to work beyond the boundaries of time. Similarly, words from the psalms have the ability to do the same.

For the psalmist, the initial cry for help turns into a question of purpose. “What shall I render to You for all your goodness to me?” It is a good question to ask, and one that gives pause. It is easy to jump to action by honing a list of ways that we might serve, but our rending first belongs to God, and from that love action will flow. Through the cyclical movement of expressing love, calling out when needs frighten or burden and trusting in God’s presence, the possibility awakens within us that no matter what is going on in and around us, moments of solace can be found, that our strength can be renewed, and that we possess the ability to engage and practice the art of offering blessing.

Is it possible to arrive at a different conclusion, to believe that God has not heard our cries for help, when the difficulties remain or the pain continues, when hurt remain raw and sickness is not abated, when the bills continue to pile up, or you fill in the blank. Yes, it is understandable with long-suffering that such an assumption can be drawn. If found to be in this place it is best to not judge or try and force change upon the self or another. Reawakening is at the hands of the creator and it is always possible.

The psalmist chooses to drink the chalice of Love and to bear witness to the Bread of Life. Understood in these acts of devotion is the desire to decrease the pull and drive of exerting personal will and to allow for the waiting and discovery of God's. There is the excitement to co-create with the Almighty, and the wonder of being called a friend and with the bonds of fear loosened there is freedom to dance, for our life to find its full expression in God, depicted so delightfully in words of the choir's anthem, "And he will joy over you in song!" Most importantly, these gifts of chalice and bread find fulfillment in the life of Jesus, and therefore are not done in private but in the presence of God's people assembled in worship and gathered around the table.

In worship, both our praise and our cries for help are prayer. As Eugene Peterson writes, "Prayer is speech that is most alive. The breath that is breathed into us by God is breathed back by us to God. When we pray we are using language closest to the source of language... We habituate ourselves to the language native to the country of salvation, the land of the living."ⁱⁱ

In this season of Easter, may we walk hand in hand with Love in the resurrected land of the living.

i Richardson, Jan., *The Cure for Sorrow – A Book for Blessings for Times of Grief* (Orlando, FL.: Wanton Gospeller Press, 2016), p. xiv-xv.

ii Dark, J. David., *Feasting on the Word, Year A. Volume 2*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, Editors (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press), p. 410