

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Rev. Catherine Buchan

PSALM 107

30th July 2017

Psalm 107

Mark 6:47-52

This month we have looked at Psalm 103, which tells us to praise God because of his character. Then we read Psalm 104 which encourages us to praise and wonder as we look at creation. Psalm 105 reminded us of God's covenant promises and provision for his people as reasons to praise him, and last week Psalm 106 reminded us of God's grace even when his people do wrong and turn from him and his ways. All reasons for us to give God praise and thanks. But there is more. So far, all our Psalms have spoken of things which are true for everyone, reasons that everyone has to glorify God. But Psalm 107, while still universal in scope, asks us to think about our personal reasons for praise.

Sing Psalm 107 1-9, at hymn 71 "Give thanks unto the Lord our God."

The first part of the Psalm talks about people who have been lost and wandering in the wilderness, trying to find a safe place to live. It may be thinking of those who have recently made the journey home from exile, but it is worded in such a way that those of us who have not had that precise experience – like all of us here – can still relate to the words. We can think of times when we have felt like we were living in a trackless desert, not knowing what to do or where to go or whether the effort of life was even worth it. When people are in such situations they nearly always think that no one else feels that way or ever has, but in fact most of us go through desert wanderings in our lives, and few if any live a life which passes serenely from one thing to the next with no pause or difficulty. So as you read this part of the Psalm, you are called to think of the desert wanderings in your life. You may even be in such a place today. If you are, the promise, the promise that many, many over the ages have found to be true, is that if we "cry to the Lord" in our trouble, he will save us from our distress.

Those who were lost and wandering are now found, now live in security, and are fed. And so they should "Thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind." And so should we.

But what if you don't relate to that picture, what if that is not your personal story? Well, here is the next picture:

Read Psalm 107:10-16

Darkness and gloom and imprisonment. Again, the Psalmist may well be referring to the way that some of the Israelites experienced their captivity in Babylon, and the hard labour which bowed them down there. But he or she is too clever to say so explicitly. When we are too explicit, we can leave people out. And darkness and gloom and imprisonment can take many forms. It can be physical: there are many

people who are or have been in prison and know that the effect of hearing doors lock behind you can be one which never leaves you, even if you have deserved it. There are others who feel tied to one place by circumstance: young mothers who can feel that their personal freedom has ended with the care of a child; old people whose limbs or minds are slowing down can really feel this as they are more and more tied to the home.

And then what of those whose chains are not physical, but psychological or social? Those who suffer from darkness in the mind, the darkness of depression. Those who feel that they cannot be themselves because of the pressure to conform to peers or colleagues. There are many reasons why this picture might be a part of your story, now or in the past – or possibly in the future.

And if so, the promise is this, that when such people call to God, he brings them out of darkness and gloom, and he breaks bonds, not just a little bit, but “asunder”. The Psalmist is picturing the bonds, chains or cuffs or whatever as shattering into little pieces, not just bending a little to ease the pain. They are gone and they can’t be re-used. They can’t come back. People who have known any of this should “Thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind.”

Everyone has a story. Here is the next one:

Read Psalm 107:17-22

Some were fools through their sinful ways. Some translations use the Greek and say that some were sick through their sinful ways, but that could lead to people equating illness with sinfulness, which is not what the Hebrew says. The Hebrew is talking of foolish sin, which results in sickness; it does not say that all sickness is rooted in sin. Who knows just what the Psalmist had in mind. But even then there were those who used drugs, not injecting, of course, or even smoking, but rubbing preparations of drugs on the skin or eating various seeds to gain a special effect. And one of the side effects of such foolishness, as our society knows only too well is that the appetite for normal, healthy human life decreases, appetite fails, and people can draw near to death.

Or the Psalmist might have STDs in mind, sexually transmitted diseases: they are not a new thing either. Or he may have been thinking of the foolishness of gluttony, which can, if indulged to excess, lead to a diminishing of life. Or the sadness of alcoholism – none of this is new. So many things, so many foolish choices we can make in life which make us sick, which diminish our health and happiness, although we do them in a quest for happiness. And you might have this picture in your life story as well.

As is often the case, the people in this picture did not call out for help until it was nearly too late. But when they did call to God he saved them from their distress. And so they and we should “Thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind.”

Read Psalm 107:23-32

Sing hymn 260 Eternal Father, strong to save

The people of Israel, as we have noted distrusted the unpredictable seas. Their land had a coast, but few natural harbours and they were not a seafaring nation. But in the time of exile, some of them had joined the Phoenician sailors and traders, who

helped make Babylon great. And they discovered for themselves the unpredictability of the sea. When I read this section I think of Jonah, running away from God and finding himself caught up in a stormy situation. And I think of Jesus calming the storm. But I also think of the many, many who venture onto these same Mediterranean waters, in boats often less sea-worthy than those the ancient peoples would have sailed in, who are seeking, not to do business, but to save their lives.

The Psalmist says that those who went down to the sea in ships saw God's wondrous works in the deep – so it is not all sea-sickness and danger. But the reason that this picture is included is because of the storms, because of the danger. The reason that we pray for those who set sail today in overcrowded, unsafe shipping is because of the potential for storm and danger.

And even if you have not been in a nautical near-disaster, this picture may speak to your own life. Maybe you have been through a stormy period – in a relationship, within the family, at work. Maybe your whole life has at times seemed to be nothing more than this storm that threatened to drown you, to obliterate anything good from your life. Maybe you are in that place just now, and you need to ask Jesus to speak and say "Peace, be still."

Those who have been involved in storms should "Thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind."

The rest of the Psalm, which we read earlier, is about how God reverses things. He turns rivers to a desert – useful if you need to pass that way - and deserts into fertile land. He gives the hungry food and the wherewithal to live. But if they get uppity, if people, princes or others, use his good gifts to oppress others, he can reverse their position and fortune as well. Our God is the one who changes things, even when they seem unchangeable.

"Let the redeemed of the Lord say so" urges the Psalmist (v:2). Redeemed is an interesting choice of word, it means those bought back, bought out of bondage. I have fortunately never had to patronise a pawn shop, but I understand that if you do, you give your valuable item into the shop-keeper's care and they advance you some money. When you want your item back, you must return the money with a bit of interest, and of course, if after a certain time you don't the pawnbroker is free to recoup his money by selling your item for profit. The Psalmist sees us as people needing in some way to be bought back, and it is a thought which St. Paul picks up in his letter to the Galatians, and St. Peter uses in his first letter, as they both refer to Jesus as having redeemed his people.

So all of us are redeemed people. All of us have been bought back from difficulty and bondage of various kinds, and the price paid was the death of God's Son. All of us have a story to tell of how God has changed things for us. Some stories are dramatic, some are of small changes which made and make a big difference. And we should say so. We should tell our stories, in praise of God and in encouragement of others so that they too can join our praises, so that they too can look at their own lives and see that God has been and is at work with them.

So here is my challenge for next Sunday. Next Sunday I am going to make space in the service for some of us to get up and in no more than about three sentences tell of God's work in our stories. The redeemed of the Lord are going to get a chance to say so. Don't panic: no one will be put on the spot. I will ask two or three of you to consider doing this, but there will also be a time for anyone who has a story to tell it

to us all. So think about it. Think about your story, and its twists and turns. Where do you see God's hand in it? Where do you see God changing things, reversing things, taking the impossible and making it possible? It may be that when you tell your story, you want to express your praise in a hymn. In that case let me know in advance – by Thursday – so that I can give our organist warning!

But let the redeemed of the Lord say so, and in saying so let us “Thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind.” Amen.

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