

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend Joshua Narcisse
Sunday, July 16, 2023

Psalm 103

Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and all that is within me,
bless his holy name.

Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and do not forget all his benefits—
who forgives all your iniquity,
who heals all your diseases,
who redeems your life from the Pit,
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,
who satisfies you with good as long as you live
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

The LORD works vindication
and justice for all who are oppressed.

He made known his ways to Moses,
his acts to the people of Israel.

The LORD is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

He will not always accuse,
nor will he keep his anger forever.

He does not deal with us according to our sins
nor repay us according to our iniquities.

For as the heavens are high above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;
as far as the east is from the west,
so far he removes our transgressions from us.

As a father has compassion for his children,
so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him.

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For he knows how we were made;
he remembers that we are dust.

As for mortals, their days are like grass;
they flourish like a flower of the field;
for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
and its place knows it no more.

But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting
on those who fear him,
and his righteousness to children's children,
to those who keep his covenant
and remember to do his commandments.

The LORD has established his throne in the heavens,
and his kingdom rules over all.

Bless the LORD, O you his angels,
you mighty ones who do his bidding,
obedient to his spoken word.

Bless the LORD, all his hosts,
his ministers who do his will.

Bless the LORD, all his works,
in all places of his dominion.

Bless the LORD, O my soul.

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The church where I was first formed offered me many things as I tried to make the faith I inherited from my mother and grandmother into my own. The youth group gave me a safe space to ask questions about God and wrestle with my doubts and my curiosities. The councils of the church offered me a chance to see up close and personal what it takes to run a ministry. And worship each Sunday reminded me that the chief aim of humankind is indeed to “glorify God and enjoy God forever.”

The church where I was first formed offered me many lessons in what it meant to be faithful. But the one that for me was the most important and indeed remains the most enduring is the practice of testifying.

In the church where I was first formed, before worship would formally begin, we would gather to share in a devotional service. An Elder would be at the front leading the congregation in the singing of hymns and spirituals and eventually, the floor would be opened to anyone who had a testimony they wanted to share; a story about how God had shown up and shown out in their lives, a desire to recount and share publicly the blessings God sent their way or the problems God had solved, or the healing God had wrought. And without fail someone each week would have a testimony and it would go a little something like this: “First giving honor to God who is the head of my life. To the pastor, first lady, all the ministers, officers, and to everyone who is my father’s child.”

And once everyone had been acknowledged, before getting into the content of the testimony, the person testifying would continue speaking and begin establishing the context for their testimony. They would usually say something like “I’m glad to be in the house of the Lord one more time. I could’ve been dead, sleeping in my grave, but I’m grateful that my mattress was not my cooling board. I want to thank God for the activity of my limbs, and for a reasonable portion of health. I want to thank God for keeping food on my table and clothes on my back and keeping me in my right mind.”

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The context they would establish would be a reminder to everyone who had gathered that the specifics of the testimony they were about to share, the results of the blessing they were about to inform us about, the particularities of the solution provided for their problems were all a result of the promise, presence, and power of God. Big or small, easy or difficult, routine or extraordinary, the testimony you were about to hear was just one more example of why they were giving thanks to God and why you should too.

If you grew up in a church similar to the one I grew up in then this may sound familiar and you know it to be true, maybe you have offered your own testimony before during a devotional service and spoken aloud about the difference God had made in your life. Or perhaps a devotional service is foreign to you and you didn't have moments like that in the church where you were first formed. Perhaps you don't have much practice with the practice of testifying, and for you the idea of talking about how God has blessed you or solved a problem or shown up in your life feels: uncomfortable. Whether this is familiar to you or foreign, whether you need a reminder or an introduction, both are provided by the Psalmist as we read the 103rd Psalm. Psalm 103 provides for us an example of what it means to engage in thanksgiving through a practice of remembrance and testimony, and it offers us a glimpse of how thanksgiving shapes us for the world we are called to shape to the glory of God.

Remembrance. Testimony. They each build on one another, each feed on one another, each depend on one another for efficacy. Testimony is not possible without remembrance, and remembrance is of no impact with the chance to testify and recall the story of your survival. When was the last time you told your story? Your story of how you survived? How you made it? How you came back from the brink? How you held it all together? Remembrance. It's what's at work behind the scenes as the Psalmist pieces together these lines of poetic testimony. The Psalmist is remembering all that had happened in order to testify to what God had done.

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Remembrance.

It's remembrance that shapes the first line of this Psalm: "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits." Bless the Lord, worship the Lord, speak well of God with your words, sing out to the Lord in song. "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget." It's clear to the Psalmist and the very rhythm and patterns of our very lives bear it out to be true that in order to "Bless the Lord" in order to cry out to God, in order to having something worth saying to God and about God you much remember, you must understand the context of your life's story, you must not forget.

One of the most frustrating things that I navigate in my own life and I imagine some of you experience it too, is that it is becoming increasingly difficult to keep track of when things occurred as the years continue to pass by. What happened 2 years ago feels like it was just last week, what happened last week feels like 2 years ago. It can be maddening how time slips through our fingers refusing to allow us to recall it chronologically with accuracy. Maybe you've had the same experience I've had, trying to recall when a particular moment occurred during the pandemic only to realize that pandemic time wasn't even real time and everything that happened over the few years have all jumbled themselves together in a continuous flow of joy and pain, laughter and lament, uncertainty and new beginnings. It is hard to remember when time won't cooperate, and even easier to forget. And that is why the Psalmist does not allow us to proceed through this Psalm without the imperative reminder, "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget." For if we forget, then we lose the context in which our very lives have unfolded. And there is something dangerous about forgetting the context in which your story unfolds. If you forget the context then you might begin to think that all you've managed to do and all you've managed to build and all you've managed to achieve is a result of your unaided hard work. It's dangerous to forget the context. If you forget you might begin to think that your story is more important than someone else's story and even forget that they exist. It's dangerous to forget the context. If you forget the context in which your story unfolds you might also forget who the author of your story is and might begin to take for granted the story that they've been writing. The Psalmist implores us, "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget." Because the

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Psalmist understood that the people of Israel had a storytelling problem and so too do we often have issues recounting our story as a people with honesty, integrity, and thanksgiving. And if you need an example of our issue with storytelling in this world just look at the policies that have been passed in an attempt to lay claim to what constitutes true history. Take a look at court decisions that have been made attempting to redefine the legacies of separation, subjugation and human imposed suffering. The Psalmist tells us, "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget." Because it is hard to remember and even easier to forget, and if we forget, there are dangerous consequences for the stories we will tell.

And we can tell ourselves some stories, can't we? We can spin truth out of lies because of the shame and the pain. We can turn our failures into the triumphs and paint rosy pictures out of the broken pieces of dashed dreams and convince ourselves that it's always been good and everything has always been great, and so often we do it and we put on a good face and that's how we survive, but that is not thanksgiving.

"Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits." That's the key right there in those few words that end verse two. "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits." For the presence of benefits ought to remind us that there is a place in our lives in which we are lacking. For me each time I read this Psalm the language of benefits makes me think of a benefits package that you receive when you get a job offer. Medical, vision, dental, death and disability, life insurance, FSAs, HSAs, 401Ks, 403Bs, and that most sacred of benefits, PTO paid time.

Benefits.

I recently had an opportunity to get away for a while. I even shared with some of you in the weeks leading up to it how excited I was just to step away for a while. To burn some of that PTO before the fiscal year drew to a close. And I did just that. I lounged around, read a few books, got back to journaling, but the highlight of my time off was a brief trip to Birmingham where I ate, drank, rested and even caught up with an old friend. We hadn't seen each other in years and while we knew generally what each other was up to we hadn't caught one another up on the

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details. And so we did as one does when catching up with friends. How's life? How's your family? How's work? And at that question they were all too excited to share. Let me put it like this, they are in love with their job. And it's not just the impact of the work they're doing. It's not just the flexibility of the hours. What has them most excited are the benefits. And I must admit after I heard about the medical plan they're on and how much the company contributes into the 401K plan and about the workplace culture and all the benefits of working at that company I asked where I could apply! It was the benefits package that made all the difference to them because the benefits bridged the gap so that if something happened, they wouldn't lack the resources necessary to meet the demands of whatever situation arose. And so to, the Psalmist invites us to consider the benefits package we have access to as one whose life has been claimed by God. And it is a rather large benefits package.

The Psalmist provides a near comprehensive list for you to consider. "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits" who gives:

- Forgiveness for iniquity
- Healing for disease
- Redemption for death
- Who invests love and mercy in our lives, and
- Promises to satisfy us with good
- Who renews our lives over and over again.

"Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits" For God: Vindicates us, and secures justice for the oppressed

For God was faithful to our ancestors and promises to be merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

God does not accuse, does not hold our wrongdoings against us

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God's anger doesn't kindle against us forever, nor does God put a limit on God's great love for us.

God is compassionate as compassionate and God knows how we were made.

A comprehensive list of all benefits God not only offers but imposes upon our very lives. A comprehensive list of all the reasons we have to give God thanks, and if that list was not enough, maybe you can use it as a starting point to become more specific, for these benefits are not something to just rehearse, they compel us to respond, to testify. The Psalmist is inviting us, even daring you to get specific. To make it personal. "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits," like when God offered you forgiveness when you couldn't forgive yourself. "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits," like when you the bloodwork showed signs of terminal illness and yet here you are, scared and even tender, but here. "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits," like when you found yourself at wits end and had nothing more to give nothing more to offer, nothing more to hope for, even nothing more to live for, and still each morning God touched you with a hand of mercy and you found your way back from the edge with new energy, new creativity, new passion. "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits." The recovery from addiction. The management of chronic pain and mental illness. The regaining of your identity after the divorce. The remembering of joy so long after laying that loved one to rest. The regaining of faith after it had failed. The reconciliation of that relationship. The bills that were paid when there wasn't anything left to pay them with. "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits." Beloved, have you found a reason to testify yet? For if you remember what the Lord has done, then you have cause to testify. In that church where I was first formed, the devotional service wasn't just an opportunity for someone to grab the mic and be the center of attention for a little while, though that did happen every so often. The devotional service was an opportunity for others to hear what God has done and in hearing what God had done for someone else, remember what God had done for them and testify also to the power of God. We are being invited to do the very same thing. And we can even practice it right now. Take a moment, you can even close your eyes, if you nod off your

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pew neighbor will nudge you I promise. But take a moment, close your eyes if you're comfortable, and think about your story. Do you remember where it all started? Think about where you thought your story would go, what you expected to happen, how you expected things to end up. The twists and the turns. The impossibly good times that still make you warm at the memory. Even the times that still prickle with the pain of loss and even powerlessness. Think about your story. Where did God show up? What did God do? How did God deliver you from the clutches of what you thought would harm you? Remember. For if you remember, then you can sing in agreement with the words of the Gospel song I grew up with:

“As I look back over my life
And I think things over I can truly say that I've been blessed
I've got a testimony”

And Beloved, that testimony is not just for you. Someone needs to hear it, someone needs to know that if God has blessed you then that means God is in their neighborhood too and what they need from God is not far off. We are all called to testify and to remember, for in doing those two things we are transformed. Transformed from people who think that we are the Creator into those who remember we are the created. Transformed from people who believe we can know it all and understand it all, into those who realize the Psalmist is correct, “God knows how we were made, God remembers that we are dust.” Transformed from people disinterested in this world into those who see at every turn a new opportunity for God to bring about a testimony through our hands, our feet, our voices, our dreams, our organizing, our prayers. We are called to remember and to testify so that through our testimonies we might partner with God in the shaping of this world into a better reflection of God's kingdom. So we don't get to forget. We don't get to stay quiet. If God has done anything in your life, you ought to say thank you, you owe God at least that much.

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But if the Psalmists invitation to “Bless the Lord” is too much, and if that comprehensive benefits package is too much to comprehend. Take your clue from another Psalmist, Mary Oliver, whose poem “Instructions for Living a Life” cuts straight to the point:

“Pay attention.

Be astonished.

Tell about it.”

To the glory of God, Amen.