

**Sermon for Valleyview Mennonite Church - February 11, 2018**  
**“Praise as Defiance” Psalm 103**

Let us pray: O God, by your spoken word, you created everything that is.

By your incarnate word, you redeemed us.

By your comforting word, you are with us still.

Prepare us now to hear your word to us this day. AMEN

Today our worship series, “Faith and Hope in the midst of changing times,” moves from the book of Joshua to the Psalms. As our focus statement says, “One of the most important things we do as a church in any time and place, especially in times of change, is to offer our joyous and heartfelt praise to God.” As we look back, there are things to celebrate and give praise to God but there are also things we need to lament before we can move on. Psalm 103 gives us some help as we do this. I want to give credit to Dan Epp-Tiessen for many of the ideas in this sermon.

First I will boldly state that praise can be an act of defiance. Many years ago in the mid seventies we were attending Hamilton Mennonite Church. It was there that I had my first experience of attending the funeral of a child. Erica Janzen was a delightful child with many challenges. Everyone loved her and her bright smile even in the face of the almost constant pain she endured. Our son was particularly drawn to her and loved to help her be a part of what was happening in their SS class. Erica was relieved of her pain at the tender age of 8. Her funeral will always be etched in my mind. One of the songs her parents chose was “When peace like a river attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll, whatever my lot thou hast taught me to say, it is well with my soul, it is well with my soul.” As a young mother, I sat there in stunned amazement. This was indeed praise as an act of defiance.

In November, I drove down to Bluffton, Ohio for the funeral of my dear friend of over 50 years. Betty had buried her husband in June, been diagnosed with cancer in August and died in early November. It is still all so unbelievable, so unfair. Her son and

daughter chose many of her favourite hymns and for the benediction they chose “Praise God from whom all blessings flow,” not the short version we sometimes sing as a grace song, but the grandiose version sometimes called the Mennonite national anthem or 606 in the old hymnal. Again it was hard to sing but it felt like praise as an act of defiance.

Praise can be a declaration whereby we look the horrendous evil, sin, suffering and unfairness straight in the face and acknowledge that these things are real, they hurt all too deeply, but they will not destroy our faith. As verse 17 says, “The steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting.”

The Janzen and the Sommer families were able to proclaim with deep conviction what the Psalmist says in verses 2 & 3; “Bless the Lord O my soul and do not forget all of 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.” Even when healing meant that the loved one would leave this world in order to be relieved from the pain, they were able to sing praise songs at the funerals.

This leads then to a look at what this divine benefit package might include. The Psalmist tells us that we must not forget all of the benefits bestowed on us. We humans are forgetful creatures so we are reminded to “forget not.”

The first benefit mentioned is forgiveness – God forgives all so the Psalmist says. Now forgiveness is a very large topic which we will not get into this morning. Just to say that it is quite refreshing to know God is willing to forgive all of our sins if we are truly repentant.

A second benefit mentioned is healing – God heals all of our diseases according to Psalm 103. This is a hard one for sure, particularly in the 2 stories I have shared. In those cases, there was no healing here on earth and families are left bereft of a dear loved one. But we must note that the Psalmist does not promise us that as Christians we will be able to tap into the divine power of healing whenever we wish to. What the

passage does suggest is that the God who created the human body is able to mend God's own creation. None of us would survive infancy were it not for the amazing healing process that has been divinely designed and incorporated into fabric of our human systems. I am sure that the doctors in our midst would attest to that. And perhaps the word "diseases" in this passage refers to more than physical ailments. To be honest, I am not sure just exactly what the Psalmist had in mind here but even though it is listed as a benefit, it is not always easy to hear when we are walking with someone who is suffering and with families who have lost loved ones.

A third benefit is redemption. The Psalmist puts it quite graphically – God redeems our lives from the pit. Nan Merrill puts it this way in her *Psalms for Praying*: "You save us from the snares of fear." In *The Message*, Peterson translates this line as "He redeems you from hell – He saves your life." No one is quite sure what the Psalmist had in mind here but the reassurance is this – God walks with us through very difficult times and saves us from all sorts of pitfalls.

A fourth benefit mentioned is that we are crowned with steadfast love and mercy. This one I like! This one is all about the goodness of God and from our vantage point; we know that this includes the sending of Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour to die for us and save us from our sins. Peterson's translation says that "God wraps us in goodness and eternal beauty."

And a fifth benefit is satisfaction. Verse 5 says that God satisfies our desire with good things. So God satisfies our every need and renews our spirits like the eagle. Peterson says God renews our youth – we're always young in God's presence.

So with all of these benefits, how can we keep from praising the God who bestows all of this on us? But there is a caution to note here. We must be careful with praise as an act of defiance. Praising in the face of suffering and evil can easily become denial. Difficult times must be acknowledged for what they are and not belittled. If all we do during difficult times is praise, then our faith becomes God is great

and good and isn't life just wonderful. As we all know, life is far from wonderful for many people. We must never minimize the pain and suffering that life dishes out to so many people.

Yes, there are many hymns of praise in the psalms; however, let me be quick to point out that even more are laments, prayers for deliverance from life's problems. Even though we like to avoid the lament psalms, these recognize that life can be full of struggle and that horrible things sometimes happen to good people. We need lament to keep our faith realistic and to prevent our praise from becoming denial.

Back in the 80's, we had a couple of years filled with bad things to the point that it felt like someone was picking on us. There was a major house fire destroying parts of our home, our son had been bitten by the neighbour's dog and needed plastic surgery, I had fallen and broken both bones in my left lower leg and was on a very long rehab to full recovery. It felt like it would never stop. One day when a dear soul from our church dropped by to deliver supper for us, she said that she thinks God has brought all of this on us so that our church can have the opportunity to show God's love. I clearly remember my response to her, "I wish God would find some other family for this lesson, we have had enough." In other words, please don't thank God for my misfortunes. When we praise and pretend that all is well when it is not, that is indeed very hollow praise.

Praise as defiance is very different. "Defiant praise acknowledges the deep suffering and pain of this world but reminds us that evil and suffering are not the ultimate reality. Defiant praise reminds us that God's steadfast love is strong enough to carry us through life's difficult experiences, strong enough to empower us for faithful discipleship even in the face of persecution and strong enough to carry us from this life into the next. Defiant praise reminds us that evil and suffering will not have the last word, but some day God's reign will come in all its fullness and God will renew all of creation."

Another story from my life – when my father died at age 61, the line up for the visitations seemed to never end. He was well known in the community having lived his whole life there. He was a farmer and sold seed corn all around northern Illinois. The thing that sticks in my mind is all of the comments to my mother. Like, someday you will understand why God took him. Or he will be better off in heaven than suffering here on earth. Or God has called him home. The thing that no one seemed to remember was that all of this meant that he no longer would be going home with Mom. The house she and Dad shared would now be a lonely place. Her companion of over 35 years would no longer be with her. In the evenings, she would no longer have someone to share her day with. Many years after that, Mom remarked to me that she still didn't understand why she had only 35 years with her husband when many of her friends were now celebrating their 50<sup>th</sup> and 60<sup>th</sup> anniversaries and her aunt and uncle were celebrating their 70<sup>th</sup>. The same was true for my youngest brother needing now to run the family farm on his own. He had lost his mentor and teacher. For a young man in his early 20's, this was very traumatic. Praise in these situations rings hollow and is very shallow. Both Mom and my brother needed to lament before they could praise.

Claus Westermann makes a helpful observation. “The secret of praise is its ability to make contact with God; through praise one remains with God.” This is why praise is so central to our worship and our life as Christians. Praise connects us with God. Praise in our worship often helps us experience some of the love, grace, and power of God and this can be quite powerful. Praise touches vulnerable places in our hearts.

Some of you will remember that when Dan Epp-Tiessen was here for our annual lectureship series, he shared the following story. “A number of years ago our 8 year old son, Tim, died of cancer. During the last months of his life Tim was unconscious and so Esther and I took turns keeping watch by his bed waiting for the inevitable. To fill the time, I worked my way through the hymnal, singing all the hymns that I knew. I began

to notice something that I thought was quite odd. It was the hymns of praise that spoke most meaningfully to me and that I sang over and over.

“I remember one time how the tears were streaming down my cheeks as I sang “Now thank we all our God with hearts and hands and voices, who wondrous things has done, in whom this world rejoices.” I remember feeling guilty and wondering if I was going crazy. How could I sing hymns of praise while I was watching Tim die?

Dan goes on to say: “Praise puts us in touch with God, and this connection is precisely what I needed during that painful period in my life. I needed to open myself to God and experience God’s love and grace and strength surrounding and sustaining me. Those hymns of praise were doing their work on me even though I was not consciously aware of how they were impacting me.”

Words of praise create a world where God is present and can be trusted. It is similar to when a parent reassures their anxious child that all will be well at school. “The teacher will look after you and Mom and Dad will be there to pick you up after school. You will be o.k.” The Psalmist says that this is what our God is like and when we praise we invoke God’s care so that no matter what life dishes out, we live in the sturdy world of God’s love.

Here are a couple of questions for you to think about this week. How have you participated in praise as an act of defiance in the face of life’s painful realities? How have you observed praise as denial of pain and struggle? Does praise help you to connect with and abide with God?

In closing let’s listen to Psalm 103 from *Psalms for Praying: An Invitation to Wholeness* by Nan C, Merrill.

Bless the Beloved, O my soul and all that is within me;

I bless your Holy name!

Bless the Beloved, O my soul and remember the goodness of Love.

You forgive our stubbornness,

You heal our disease,  
 You save us from snares of fear,  
 You crown us with steadfast love and mercy,  
 You satisfy our every need and renew our spirit like the eagle's.  
 Through You comes peace and justice for all who are oppressed.  
 You make known the pathway of truth and guide us on our way.  
 You are merciful and gracious, quelling our anger with your patient love.  
 You love us more than we can ask or imagine; in truth we belong to you.  
 For You understand us, requiting us not according to our ignorance and error.  
 As far as the heavens are high above the earth,  
 So great is your loving response toward those who are humble.  
 So far does your enduring strength uphold those who face the darkness within.  
 As parents are concerned for their children,  
 So you come to those who reach out in faith.  
 For our ways are known, our weaknesses are seen with compassion.  
 The steadfast love of the Beloved is from everlasting to everlasting  
 To those who awaken, and justice to all generations,  
 To those who remember your promises and follow your voice.  
 The Beloved's home is in our hearts as we discover in silence.  
 Bless the Beloved, O you angels, you faith-filled ones who hear the Word,  
 Following the voice of love!  
 Bless the Beloved all you people, those who abandon themselves into love's hands!  
 Praise the Beloved, praise all of creation!  
Praise the Beloved, O my soul! AMEN

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"In the face of change" by Dan Epp-Thiessen and Elsie Rempel, Mennonite Church Canada, 2010.

*Psalms for Praying: An Invitation to Wholeness* by Nan C. Merrill, Continuum, New York, 2007, pp. 201-203.

*The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* by Eugene H. Peterson, NavPress, 2005, pp. 786-787.

"The Divine Benefits Package – A Study of Psalm 103" by Wayne Jackson, Christian Courier Publications.