



WHAT HAVE YOU DONE FOR ME LATELY?

November 18, 2007
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Exodus 17:1-7; Psalm 103

**“Bless the Lord O my soul,
and forget not all his benefits.”**
--Psalm 103:2 (ESV)

As Jim Tressel and his Ohio State gang were putting it to the “maize and blue” up in the Big House yesterday I turned away from the pain for a while and went upstairs and surfed the internet a bit just to kill some time. I decided to check out the site for Plymouth, Massachusetts. The website for Plymouth featured photos of Plymouth’s annual “America’s Thanksgiving Parade.” It’s a big deal as you can imagine in Plymouth. A big celebration with balloons and pilgrims and Indians and floats.

Now, I’ve heard that some of the “locals” in Plymouth – descendants of the original Pilgrims – aren’t all that enamored of the busyness and commotion of the day. They’re not crazy about sharing the town with a bunch of tourists and so they forego the Thanksgiving Parade and go into hiding at this time of year, and curse their ancestors in a tongue-in-cheek sort of way. “I hate the Pilgrims,” says one of them, “for just because they were always cheerful in tough times, and thankful, and worked hard, and all of that, everybody thinks we should do the same. It was an ill wind that blew the *Mayflower* into Plymouth Harbor.”

We all have these ill moods – when we don’t exactly feel like being grateful or thankful or happy on cue – when the calendar and culture tell us we are to be pleased, happy, thankful, and joyful whether we are or not – when there’s in us something of that grumbling spirit evidenced in our earlier reading from Exodus 17 (*Exodus 17:1-7*). Aren’t we sometimes like those complaining, kvetching people at Massah and Meribah – forgetful of the ways God has proven faithful to us? It’s easy to slip into belly-aching about this and about that, -- if not verbally out loud, at least inwardly, silently to yourself

– about how life isn't panning out so great, about how things could be better, --- and God, where are you anyway?

“Are you among us or not?” Are you with us or not? If you are with us, do something now. Don't just remind us, God, of our glorious past or our bright future. We are thirsty right now. What good are memory and hope if we die of thirst? What have you done for us lately? What have you done for *me* lately?

We all know about this murmuring thing. We all do it.

Well, a good remedy for this kind of murmuring, complaining is Psalm 103. I invite you to read the psalm responsively with me this morning. I will read the odd-numbered verses, and I invite you to read the even-numbered verses. You will find it at page 430 of the Old Testament in the pew Bible. As you're turning to it let me say that Psalm 103 is a psalm of praise for God's steadfast love, for his faithfulness and provision. Let us read it now responsively.

Psalm 103

Of David.

¹*Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and all that is within me,
bless his holy name.*

²*Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and do not forget all his benefits—*

³*who forgives all your iniquity,
who heals all your diseases,*

⁴*who redeems your life from the Pit,
who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,*

⁵*who satisfies you with good as long as you live
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.*

⁶*The LORD works vindication
and justice for all who are oppressed.*

⁷*He made known his ways to Moses,
his acts to the people of Israel.*

⁸*The LORD is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.*

⁹*He will not always accuse,
nor will he keep his anger for ever.*

- ¹⁰***He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor repay us according to our iniquities.***
- ¹¹*For as the heavens are high above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love towards those who fear him;*
- ¹²***as far as the east is from the west,
so far he removes our transgressions from us.***
- ¹³*As a father has compassion for his children,
so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him.*
- ¹⁴***For he knows how we were made;
he remembers that we are dust.***
- ¹⁵*As for mortals, their days are like grass;
they flourish like a flower of the field;*
- ¹⁶***for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
and its place knows it no more.***
- ¹⁷*But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting
on those who fear him,
and his righteousness to children's children,*
- ¹⁸***to those who keep his covenant
and remember to do his commandments.***
- ¹⁹*The LORD has established his throne in the heavens,
and his kingdom rules over all.*
- ²⁰***Bless the LORD, O you his angels,
you mighty ones who do his bidding,
obedient to his spoken word.***
- ²¹*Bless the LORD, all his hosts,
his ministers that do his will.*
- ²²***Bless the LORD, all his works,
in all places of his dominion.***
Bless the LORD, O my soul.

Now, you may wonder what points I want us to take away on this Sunday before Thanksgiving Day. Well, I am going to suggest that there are three things that are to be learned from our readings this morning – from reading Exodus 17 and from reading Psalm 103 in combination -- and I hope these three lessons will see you through lunch today, through Thanksgiving Day, and through the rest of your life.

First, remember to remember.

Remember to remember.

That's what Psalm 103:2 says.

*“Bless the Lord O my soul,
and forget not all his benefits.”*

First, remember to remember. The people of Israel, there in the desert,, so obsessed with their present privations, forgot to remember the God who had brought them out of Egypt in the first place, through all that water, and forgot to remember that that God would not bring them this far to let them die of thirst in the desert. That would be a wasted investment – all that trouble and annoyance for nothing.

This Thursday, as you gather around your table with your family and perhaps also with family friends, -- around the heapings of Turkey and stuffing and cranberry sauce and pumpkin pie, or whatever you eat at your Thanksgiving Dinner -- I invite you to remember not the usual good things, not the list of the blessings you have received, like an audit at a stockholders' meeting, but the bad things, by name, that have happened to you, the terrible things, the worst things.

Think of your worst moments, your sorrows, your losses, your sadness, and then remember that here you are, able to remember them. You got through the worst day of your life; there may be yet a worse one in store for you, but that's for next Thanksgiving. This Thanksgiving you got through the trauma, you got through the trial, you endured the temptation, you survived the bad relationship, you're making your way out of the dark and out the miry clay.

Remember who got you through. You got into the mess on your own, but remember that it was the Lord who got you out of it, got you through it, and was with you in the middle of it.

There are more troubles to come, maybe infinitely more troubles to come and you may be in trouble right now, but if you remember to remember you will remember as the old spiritual says, “How I got over.” How I was spared, how the Lord did a wonderful thing in bringing me through to this present moment; and how he did it I will never know, how I got here I will never know, but I will remember to remember to thank God.

Remember to remember, and not just the good things – you and I tend to take those for granted – but remember the bad things, and then look to see where you are. That's the first thing: remember to remember.

Then second, realize that Thanksgiving is not an event or a day or a moment; it is a process, isn't it? The people of Israel were on a journey in the wilderness, moving from one place to the next. They weren't where they had been. Neither were they yet where they were going. They were rather in the "middest" – as the Old English word has it – or middle of it, --as are you and I.

Tender mercies do not happen always at once, always all at one time: sometimes there are long stretches, long parched periods where we are dry, without guidance, and seemingly without inner or outer strength, and we have to function like the camel, living on what we have stored up. (That's why it is so important to learn in childhood and in youth, but also in our adult years the promises of faith...to be surrounded and immersed in a community of faith...It gives us a store to draw on in the hard times when the hard times come as they inevitably do.)

We will have times
to draw on what has been stored.

But during these dry, parched times we just have to keep moving like the camel, living on what we have stored up. Like the camel we have to keep moving forward, until the mercies come again – and they will – they'll come in bunches like dates on a date palm, in bunches like bananas, -- such that we pause in amazement.

*Great is Thy faithfulness, O God, my father;
Morning my morning, new mercies I see.
All I have needed, Thy hand hath provided:
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me.¹*

I heard about a very old Sunday bulletin where the printer had made a mistake and had listed the service for the fourth Thursday in November 1936 as "Thanksgiving Day.." What a wonderful mistake! What a wonderful blessing that little mistake can make in an attitude, a life, a world!

We're in stewardship season right now, and stewardship isn't about filling an estimate of giving card for the coming year out of a sense of obligation. Yes, there is sacrifice, but it is a sacrifice made out of a sense of thanksgiving, out of a sense of gratitude. It is "thanksgiving." And that is true even when we have experienced pain, have gone through or are going through a time of pain.

Don't make the mistake of the children of Israel, and mistake a *moment's privation* for the *end of the world*. Thanksgiving is a process; it is Thanksgiving.

**And then thirdly, lastly, against all perils remember this: do not tempt God.
Do not put God to the test.**

I was visiting with Betty Millard, a dear member here the other day, and Betty said something I really liked. She said: “God is not a science project, a science experiment.” – meaning you know, in a science experiment you put a hunch, a hypothesis to the test of proof. You can’t do that with God. It doesn’t work.

But that doesn’t keep us from trying, does it? It’s probably just human instinct. “You do this for me, God, and in return I’ll do such and such.” “Or, you’ve got to come through on this, God, or....or” -- and you can fill in the blanks.

Most of us don’t actually say that kind of thing out loud; we may not even think it consciously, but it’s there and it’s putting God to the proof. And for some it really becomes their “sticking point.” They’ll ask God to do something, and when God doesn’t come through as hoped, they “walk” (spiritually speaking). They give up on faith, give up on church, give up on God. I bet you know somebody like that. My wife Cathy calls it the “Aladdin’s Lamp” view of God. – God the genie. And if God the genie doesn’t come through, well then.....

As I said, it’s a natural thing. And we all do it to one degree – put God to the proof, that is. “I need to have you do this, God. I want you to do this. I implore you to do this.”

And we hold compassionately in our hearts those who prayed that prayer, who held some hope – only to find that God didn’t come through for them the way they’d expected and hoped. Their hurt, their disappointment is very real. We need to realize that and to hold them in our hearts...in prayer.

Maybe that’s where some of you are this morning. If the rest of us could peer into your soul – see into your heart – we’d see some deep disappointment --- some hope that God didn’t come through on. And yet, you are here.

If that is so, -- if that is how it is with you -- all I can say is:
Way to go!
Good for you!
Keep on keeping on.....like the camel!

You see, friends, we are not to test God.
We are not to put God to the proof.
We are not to tempt God.
We are to *trust* God – even when to trust is difficult, especially when to trust is difficult.

You are to trust God. Do not make God give you constant proofs of loyalty, power, and affection. You can tell in a relationship that the lights are going out when one of the parties is constantly saying to the other, “Do you love me? Prove it.”

Love is based not on proof but on trust. Infidelity is based on proof – have you ever thought about that? Love, however, is based upon trust.

God is not to be tempted. He never forgot how the people at Massah and Meribah tried to tempt him and his providence in the wilderness; he forgave them, but he never forgot, and this incident is referred to at least a dozen times throughout both the Old and New Testaments.

God is to be trusted in good season and in bad, when we win or when we lose, whether we live or whether we die. God is to be trusted, for God is trustworthy and true; and the evidence of our own being is sufficient evidence of that.

So:

1. Remember to remember – the bad things, not just the good.
2. Thanksgiving is *Thanksgiving*, -- a life of gratitude, a work in progress.
3. God is not to be tempted but to be trusted.

It is the case, as every Pilgrim knows, that our best days are ahead of us and not behind us, and for that we thank God; and it is indeed the case, as every Pilgrim knows, that we have not yet arrived at where we are meant to be. This is not our destination, and for that we thank God; and it is indeed the case that the Lord has not brought us this far to abandon us in the wilderness of our own despair and disappointment, and for that we thank God. And so we know the answer to the impertinent question asked by the people in the wilderness: “Is the Lord among us or not?” You bet your lives he is, for how else would he be here to ask that question and be assured of the glorious answer?

So: “*Bless the Lord O my soul, and forget not all his benefits.*” (Ps. 103:2, ESV)
Thanks be to God.

Join me in prayer:

O loving and faithful God, give us eyes to see and a heart to praise you for blessings received. Overcome our “ain’t it awful” spirits and our tendency to focus only on the negative and not to praise you for the very things you are doing in response to our prayers. Most of all, we thank you for the God that you are. For your faithfulness and provision. Open our eyes anew to your mercies. We give you access to our spirits. Take away our hardness of heart and renew us from within. This we pray, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

¹ Thomas Chisolm (1866-1960)