

Praising the Holy One

Seeking God's Wisdom in the Bible 7

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Psalm 103: 1-14, 20-22

Introduction

Today's psalm is an exercise in remembering the best times and stories about God. If Psalm 103 were on a menu in a restaurant (remember when we used to eat at those regularly?) I think it would be described as a fine, homemade broth with all the essences of its ingredients.

This psalm is a tasty meal, filling with all the good things from a deep and wide spiritual history. Some of our Bible's will say that this is a psalm "of David" but truthfully we don't really know. What we do know is that this psalm will tell us about God's character, and end by praising God.

Knowing God's Character

The opening of this psalm contains one of the deep memories of the Hebrew people – from the book of Exodus, the time when the Hebrew people were on the Exodus journey from Egypt, and the people had become faithless to Yahweh, and they created the Golden Calf – a statue to the god Ba'al that showed their anxiety and fear of being left for nothing by the God who had promised them so much.

It was Moses who interceded on their behalf with God, who asked God to continue to be with them, who convinces God to stick with these people. And Moses even asks something no human had done before – that he could see God's glory. In a true negotiation, God puts Moses in the cleft of a rock and lets him see the back of God, but not his face.

As God passes before Moses, he hears the words of God declaring who he is – a merciful and gracious God who is slow to anger, who is filled with love and faith, who forgives and forgives and forgives...

This is a deep memory for the Hebrew people, a memory that appears again in the ten commandments, in this psalm, in more than one of the Hebrew prophets, to remind the people of a loving and gracious God. It is an antidote to those who might want to say

that the God of the Old Testament is different than the one in the New Testament – instead this passage reminds us that Jesus came to fulfill the teachings of the Hebrews.

And this is just the start of the Psalm!

Scripture and Memory

I recently read an article about people who reread books and/or watch movies over and over again – the researchers think that in times like these, these rereadings and rewatchings are a way to cope with the uncertainty and anxiety because we already know how the stories end – we can be certain of what will happen. (Note: I love rereading books, and probably watch the Downton Abbey series once a year. so there!)

This kind of memory making helps us understand the power of this psalm.

Each verse of Psalm 103 contains within it an incalculable number of stories, like the story of the Hebrews and the golden calf. Stories when the merciful God showed up, abounding in steadfast love – as with King David, who kills a man rather than deal with the consequences of his infidelity, or the nation Israel who worships other Gods and raises an elite class that imposes slavery on the poor. Stories of Kings that are bad, stories of prophets that are raised up to confront their power and abuse of their authority for the good of all.

Today, this psalm not only speaks to us of stories known to the Hebrews, but also stories that will be told in the future – such as the story of the prodigal son, who so messes up his life that we are astonished as the forgiving father who welcomes him back and throws a party in his honor, or the one who was imprisoning the Jesus followers until God intervened and gave the man Saul a new name, Paul, and a new mission. The psalm tells us that God will remove our transgressions as far as the east is from the west, and Paul will take the gospel he now understands from the east and into the west and into the center of the Mediterranean world, the city of Rome.

Adam Hearlson, a preacher and writer in Pennsylvania, writes this of this psalm:

The beautiful part about poetry is that it dwells in the in-between spaces of our lives. Our language is capable of such specificity, and yet, even with a vocabulary that grows with each passing era (what's a google?) we still fail to capture the full breadth of our experience. The wonderful thing about poetry is that it does not aim toward specificity but toward evocation. It combines words, images, and lines in order to evoke an experience that is outside the limits of our language. The beauty of Psalm 103 is not just in its recollection of God's good acts, but also the evocation of the feelings and

stories that accompany those acts. Between each verse of the Psalm is a whole library of stories.

These stories, this library within this psalm, is our reason to praise God, especially when the world seems to have gone off the tracks, and we're trying to patiently wait and work for things to get better.

And it makes me think, what are our stories of how God has acted in our lives that we can recall during these times? What stories of forgiveness, grace and mercy might we remember?

Finally, I'd like to share with you this poem by the formidable Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, which is a reminder that turning toward God, and praising and encountering God will help see us through these times.

From Self to Thou

Walter Brueggemann

You, holy faithful, merciful God,

have called us into being,
given us names, faces, and vocations and
we live them out in freedom.

In our freedom, we notice only sometimes, that
we cannot cope with all that comes at us
we cannot finally outflank the forces that address us, and
we cannot by ourselves deal with the grief, trouble, and anger
that well up in us.

After our imagined autonomy,
we gladly turn back to you.

After we have said, "I" for a very long time,
we fall back to "Thou";

we utter the "Thou" who inhabits our memories
memories of rescue, healing and forgiveness;
we utter the "thou" who occupies our best hopes
as we hope for peace, wellbeing, and justice in the world.

We move back into faithful dialogue with you:

we say "thou" as we thank and praise you;
we say "I" as we act out our freedom and accept our responsibility.

Just now, in the face of the virus, we find our best "I" without force,
and so we say "thou,"

“thou” in power,
“thou” in mercy,
“thou” in faithfulness,
finally, “Thou”!

We remember all your wonders, and then, in gladness,
we remember who we are as yours;
we recover our gratitude, our hope, our resolve, and our confidence.

Amen.