

**SCRIPTURE READING: Psalm 103**

In one of my congregations, I had a member whose mother passed away. On the gravestone that our member chose for her mother, she had the words of this psalm: “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name!” (Psa 103:1). When I asked her why she chose that verse, she explained, “It was my momma’s favorite expression. Whenever something happened, whether it was good or bad, that is what she would say!”

What a beautiful testimony! I wonder if such could be said of us: that whatever happens to us, we would be quick to bless the Lord, to praise him with our whole being. After all, even in the midst of difficulty and sorrow, we have been given so many blessings: life and health, provision and protection, and above all, forgiveness and grace. Surely as we reflect on the fact that our sins have been separated from “as far as the east is from the west” by our compassionate Father, we have reason to bless the Lord with all that is within us. He is our Lord and he loves us.

HYMN: “PRAISE TO THE LORD, THE ALMIGHTY” *Trinity Hymnal 53*

Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation!
O my soul, praise him, for he is thy health and salvation!
All ye who hear, now to his temple draw near, join me in glad adoration.

Praise to the Lord, who o’er all things so wondrously reigneth,
shelters thee under his wings, yea, so gently sustaineth!
Hast thou not seen how thy desires e’er have been granted in what he ordaineth?

Praise to the Lord, who doth prosper thy work and defend thee!
Surely his goodness and mercy here daily attend thee;
ponder anew what the Almighty will do, if with his love he befriend thee.

Praise to the Lord, who with marvelous wisdom hath made thee,
decked thee with health, and with loving hand guided and stayed thee.
How oft in grief hath not he brought thee relief, spreading his wings to o’ershade thee!

Praise to the Lord! O let all that is in me adore him!
All that hath life and breath, come now with praises before him!
Let the amen sound from his people again; gladly fore’er we adore him.

PRAYER:

O Lord, often we are not quick to bless you and praise you. Instead, we are quick to complain, to criticize, to call you out over what is happening in our lives. Not only do you know this, but others know this as well: they know that we do not bless the Lord with all that is within us. Forgive me, O Lord; show compassion upon me; separate my sins from me; cleanse me with your precious blood. Let me voice my great joy in your everlasting love and let me gladly adore you forever. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

CATECHISM: Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 34

Why do you call him “our Lord”?

Because—not with gold or silver, but with his precious blood—he has set us free from sin and from the tyranny of the devil, and has bought us, body and soul, to be his very own.



SCRIPTURE READING: Matthew 8:1-17

These verses begin a section in Matthew's Gospel in which Jesus is presented as a Messiah who is mighty in deed. Those first four verses, though, speak not only to Jesus' might and power, but also to his compassion. In the New Testament world, leprosy covered a range of diseases: everything from what we know today as Hansen's disease to dermatosis, lupus, ringworm, and other disfiguring skin disorders. Some were contagious, some were not. But regardless, following the Old Testament instructions, lepers were placed outside the camp, isolated from everyone around.

But look at what happens: this leper ran into the midst of the crowd and bowed before Jesus. Everyone pulls back—what is he doing? Doesn't he know he is contagious? What is Jesus going to say? What is he going to do? He shows compassion, but he does something more—he touches the man. And there is a transfer—Jesus' cleanliness is transferred to the leper; but the leper's sickness, the result of the contagion of sin let loose by Adam and Eve, is placed upon Jesus. And in case we miss it, Matthew 8:17 quotes Isaiah 53: "He took our illnesses and bore our diseases." This is the wonderful exchange that Jesus performs for us: he takes our sin and we receive his righteousness. He is our Lord and he loves us.

HYMN: "HOW SWEET THE NAME OF JESUS SOUNDS" *Trinity Hymnal* 647

How sweet the name of Jesus sounds in a believer's ear!
It soothes his sorrows, heals his wounds, and drives away his fear.

It makes the wounded spirit whole, and calms the troubled breast;
'tis manna to the hungry soul, and to the weary rest.

Dear Name! the rock on which I build, my shield and hiding place,
my never-failing treas'ry filled with boundless stores of grace;

Jesus, my Shepherd, Brother, Friend, my Prophet, Priest, and King,
my Lord, my Life, my Way, my End, accept the praise I bring.

Weak is the effort of my heart, and cold my warmest thought;
but when I see thee as thou art, I'll praise thee as I ought.

Till then I would thy love proclaim with every fleeting breath;
and may the music of thy name refresh my soul in death.

PRAYER:

Lord Jesus, I am the unclean one. I have a contagion that is deep-seated and terminal—it is the guilt and corruption that I have received from Adam and Eve and has passed through the generations to me. Look upon me and have compassion—if you would do so, you can make me clean. And in fact, through your blood, you have done so: you have set me free from sin, taking it upon yourself, and you have made me clean through and through. Bless you, Lord, for being my shepherd, brother, friend and for carrying my sins and sorrows. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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SCRIPTURE READING: 1 Peter 1:3-25

How do we sustain hope in these difficult days? Peter points us to the answer by reminding us that God “has caused us to be born again to a living hope.” Our hope—our earnest expectation about life in this world and the world to come—finds its anchor in Jesus’ resurrection. In fact, Peter’s logic—like the rest of the New Testament—is that our hope is secured because just as Jesus has been raised from the dead, so we shall be.

And that future glory—our “inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading”—is what causes us to rejoice now even though we are going through fiery trials. We can trust that this glory to come is real and sure and for us because the Old Testament pointed us to it. The prophets taught of it and looked forward to it, even though they only had the hints and shadows. Even the angels would love to know more! Yet we are certain; we have a sure hope. Christ will raise us on the last day as he was raised and we will receive that for which we hope. He is our Lord and he loves us.

HYMN: “I WILL GLORY IN MY REDEEMER” Cook

I will glory in my Redeemer, whose priceless blood has ransomed me.
 Mine was the sin that drove the bitter nails, and hung him on that judgment tree.
 I will glory in my Redeemer, who crushed the power of sin and death.
 My only Savior before the Holy Judge: the Lamb who is my righteousness,
 the Lamb who is my righteousness.

I will glory in my Redeemer. My life he bought, my love he owns.
 I have no longings for another, I’m satisfied in him alone.
 I will glory in my Redeemer, his faithfulness my standing place.
 Though foes are mighty and rush upon me, my feet are firm, held by his grace,
 my feet are firm, held by his grace.

I will glory in my Redeemer, who carries me on eagle’s wings.
 He crowns my life with lovingkindness, his triumph song I’ll ever sing.
 I will glory in my Redeemer, who waits for me at gates of gold.
 And when he calls me it will be paradise, his face forever to behold,
 his face forever to behold.

PRAYER:

Father, Son, Holy Spirit—it is hard to hold on to hope right now. It is hard to hold on to the confidence that all will be set to rights, that glory will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea, that I will be raised in a new body to live a new life in a new world. And yet, Lord, your Word tells me that these things are real and true and for me—and so I believe you. I prepare my mind and my heart for action; I set my hope fully on the grace that will be brought to me when Jesus is finally revealed for all the world to see. Until that day, hold me fast through your Son, Jesus, in whose name I pray, Amen.

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**SCRIPTURE READING: Mark 6:30-44**

One of the lessons I've learned in ministry is the value of Psalm 23. One time in my previous ministry, I was at a convalescent center with our senior adult pastor. The person whom we were seeing could hardly hear us or understand us. I'll never forget that pastor getting down beside the person's ear and saying, "All right, can you hear me? We are going to say the 23rd Psalm together. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." And immediately, that person started saying those words.

That's because the idea that God shepherds us is more than an idea—it is rooted into his very relationship with us. Here, Jesus has compassion on his people because "they were like a sheep without a shepherd" (Mark 6:34). And so, he begins to teach these multitudes about his rule and reign, his grace and mercy, his salvation. This is the rich food that they need in that wilderness land. But he does something else: he prepares food for them, a table in the wilderness, with five loaves and two fish that never run out. His goodness and mercy continue to pursue them—but it continues to pursue us as well. He is our Lord, our shepherd, and he loves us.

HYMN: "HALLELUJAH, PRAISE JEHOVAH" Jordan

Hallelujah, praise Jehovah, O my soul, Jehovah praise;
I will sing the glorious praises, of my God through all my days.
Put no confidence in princes, nor for help on man depend;
he shall die, to dust returning, and his purposes shall end.

Happy is the man that chooses Israel's God to be his aid;
he is blest whose hope of blessing on the Lord his God is stayed.
Heav'n and earth the Lord created, seas and all that they contain;
he delivers from oppression, righteousness he will maintain.

Food he daily gives the hungry, sets the mourning pris'ner free,
raises those bowed down with anguish, makes the sightless eyes to see.
Well Jehovah loves the righteous, and the stranger he befriends,
helps the fatherless and widow, judgment on the wicked sends.

Hallelujah, praise Jehovah, O my soul, Jehovah praise;
I will sing the glorious praises, of my God through all my days.
Over all God reigns forever, through all ages he is King;
unto him, thy God, O Zion, joyful hallelujahs sing.

PRAYER: (based on *Trinity Hymnal* 184, "The King of Love My Shepherd Is")

The King of Love my shepherd is, whose goodness fails never. I nothing lack since I am yours and you are mine forever. Where streams of living water flow my ransomed soul you lead, and where the pleasant pastures grow, with celestial food you feed. In death's dark valley I fear no ill with you, dear Lord, beside me; your rod and staff are my comfort still, your cross before still guides me. You spread a table in my sight; your unction grace bestows; and what a transport of delight from your pure chalice flows. And so, through all the length of days, your goodness fails never; Good Shepherd, may I sing your praise within your house forever, Amen.

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SCRIPTURE READING: Acts 2:22-36

There are not many summaries of the Gospel that are better than Acts 2:22-24. In these three verses, you have so many key Gospel points. First, Jesus of Nazareth was a man, a true human being, who could be located in time and space and history. Next, Jesus was attested through his mighty works and words. These works and words—given by God—showed that he was what he claimed to be, the Messiah, the anointed one.

Moreover, Jesus was delivered up, handed over, given up to die. But by whom? To be sure, human beings did the deed: “you crucified and killed.” Yet God’s salvation purpose and plan was accomplished in his crucifixion. But it doesn’t stop there: God raised him up, Peter says. The bodily resurrection in time is vital for the good news to be good: for death could not hold Jesus down. Every part of this message—Jesus’ real humanity, his Messiahship, his crucifixion, his resurrection—they all need to be present for this news to be good, salvation for all who believe. It should cause us to love and sing and wonder at Jesus! He is our Lord and he loves us.

HYMN: “LET US LOVE AND SING AND WONDER” Taylor (also *Trinity Hymnal* 172)

Let us love and sing and wonder, let us praise the Savior’s name!
He has hushed the law’s loud thunder, he has quenched Mount Sinai’s flame.
He has washed us with his blood, he has washed us with his blood,
he has washed us with his blood, he has brought us nigh to God.

Let us love the Lord who bought us, pitied us when enemies,
called us by his grace, and taught us, gave us ears and gave us eyes:
he has washed us with his blood, he has washed us with his blood,
he has washed us with his blood, he presents our souls to God.

Let us sing, though fierce temptation threaten hard to bear us down!
For the Lord, our strong salvation, holds in view the conqueror’s crown:
he who washed us with his blood, he who washed us with his blood,
he who washed us with his blood soon will bring us home to God.

Let us wonder; grace and justice join and point to mercy’s store;
when through grace in Christ our trust is, justice smiles and asks no more.
He who washed us with his blood, he who washed us with his blood,
he who washed us with his blood has secured our way to God.

Let us praise, and join the chorus, of the saints enthroned on high;
here they trusted him before use, now their praises fill the sky:
“Thou hast washed us with thy blood; thou hast washed us with thy blood;
thou hast washed us with thy blood; thou art worthy, Lamb of God!”

PRAYER:

O Lord, we do love you. You lived in space and time, a real human life with his suffering and difficulty. You know exactly what our lives are like and so are able to sympathize with our weakness. We love you too for the mighty words and deeds you have done, not only in Holy Scripture, but also in our own lives. But most of all, we love you for hushing the law’s loud thunder, quenching Mount Sinai’s flame, calling us by grace, and sustaining us in this Christian life. We sing your praise this night: “You have washed us with your blood! You are worthy, Lamb of God!” Amen.

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SCRIPTURE READING: John 21:1-14

That word “revealed” in John 21 is interesting. We use it to talk about Scripture: the Bible reveals God to us, it is the “revelation” of God. The word has the idea of pulling back the curtain so that we can see. If God didn’t pull back the curtain about himself, both in creation and especially in Scripture, we would know nothing about God. But God has revealed himself, he has spoken, and we can know him.

That’s the word in the first verse of the chapter. Jesus “pulled back the curtain” by the Sea of Tiberius—and he “pulled back the curtain” in this way. He was standing on the shore when the disciples were fishing. And he called out to them, “Cast the net on the right side of the boat and you will find some” fish. They do so—and it recalls an earlier miracle in Luke 5 when Jesus had done just this thing. And the miracle “pulled back the curtain” on who it was standing on the beach: “it is the Lord!” None of the disciples needed to ask who he was. He is the Lord and he loves us.

HYMN: “FAIREST LORD JESUS” *Trinity Hymnal* 170

Fairest Lord Jesus, Ruler of all nature, Son of God and Son of Man!
Thee will I cherish, thee will I honor, thou, my soul’s glory, joy, and crown.

Fair are the meadows, fair are the woodlands, robed in the blooming garb of spring:
Jesus is fairer, Jesus is purer, who makes the woeful heart to sing.

Fair is the sunshine, fair is the moonlight, and all the twinkling, starry host:
Jesus shines brighter, Jesus shines purer than all the angels heav’n can boast.

Beautiful Savior! Lord of the nations! Son of God and Son of Man!
Glory and honor, praise, adoration, now and forevermore be thine.

PRAYER:

Lord Jesus, there are many days when I wish you could and would pull back the curtain to let me see you. Help me to learn that you are there all the time whether I can “see” you or not. You are the ruler of all nature, you are fairer than meadows or woodlands that I see. You are fairer than the sunshine or moonlight or the stars that I see—because you are the one who made them all and rules over it all. You are the Lord of the nations, you are Son of God and Son of Man, you are my beautiful savior. You are always with me, never forsaking me. I bless you, Amen.

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SCRIPTURE READING: Ephesians 3:14-21

Do you ever wonder what we should pray for? This pastoral prayer in Ephesians 3 helps us, I think, in discerning what we should pray. Notice that in verses 16-17, Paul prays that we would be strengthened by Christ's Spirit. How we need fresh strength, especially for these days! And how do we find it? By asking God for it—that the Spirit would strengthen us with power, that Christ would dwell in our hearts through faith.

Paul also prays that we would be certain of Christ's love. He uses two different metaphors here: one is an agricultural term ("rooted") and the other is an architectural one ("grounded"). We would have deep roots and a sure foundation in Christ's love for us. But then Paul brings these two requests together—how might we be strengthened and certain of Christ's love? Through comprehending how broad and long and high and deep is Christ's love is for us. This is knowledge that surpasses knowledge—yet it is what God offers us in and through Jesus Christ. He is our Lord and his love is rich and free.

HYMN: "THE LOVE OF CHRIST IS RICH AND FREE" McCracken

The love of Christ is rich and free; fixed on his own eternally;
nor earth, nor hell, can it remove; long as he lives, his own he'll love.

His loving heart engaged to be their everlasting Surety;
'twas love that took their cause in hand, and love maintains it to the end.

*Love cannot from its post withdraw; nor death, nor hell, nor sin, nor law,
can turn the Surety's heart away; he'll love his own to endless day.*

Love has redeemed his sheep with blood; and love will bring them safe to God;
love calls them all from death to life; and love will finish all their strife.

He loves through every changing scene, nor aught from him can Zion wean;
not all the wanderings of her heart can make his love for her depart.

*Love cannot from its post withdraw; nor death, nor hell, nor sin, nor law,
can turn the Surety's heart away; he'll love his own to endless day.*

At death, beyond the grave, he'll love; in endless bliss, his own shall prove
the blazing glory of that love which never could from them remove.

PRAYER: (adapted from *The Valley of Vision*)

O Father of Jesus, my heart melts at the love of Jesus, my brother, bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh, married to me, dead for me, risen for me. He is mine and I am his, given to me as well as for me. I am never so much mine as when I am his, or so much lost to myself until lost in him. But my love is frost and cold, ice and snow; let his love warm me, lighten my burden, be my heaven. Let the mighty tide of his everlasting love cover the rocks of my sin and care. Make me fruitful by loving to that love, for his glory, Amen.

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