

Savoring God's Presence

A sermon on Psalm 105:1-4

Hannah Coe, First Baptist Church Jefferson City, MO

August 9, 2020

WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/savoring-gods-presence

Psalm 105:1-4

- 1 O give thanks to the Lord, call on his name,
make known his deeds among the peoples.
2 Sing to him, sing praises to him;
tell of all his wonderful works.
3 Glory in his holy name;
let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice.
4 Seek the Lord and his strength;
seek his presence continually.

Think with me for a moment about your favorite meal. The one you request for your birthday. The meal that tastes like home or heaven to you. My grandmother's dressing and gravy at Thanksgiving, my dad's strawberry cake at Easter, my mom's artichoke dip at Christmas, my own recipe for homemade cinnamon rolls I make for my family are the smells, flavors, and rituals that shape who I am. How about you?

Layering and pairing specific flavors and textures is essential to good food. The Psalms hold some of the most rich and complex flavors and textures in the Bible. Hebrew poetry is as intricate, thoughtful, and conflicted as a baked Alaska—a meticulously layered dessert with ice cream on the inside and fire on the outside.

The Psalms cut to the quick of our lives while at the same time adding dimension. They are simultaneously rich yet concise, deeply familiar yet freshly relevant. Hebrew poetry uses several literary devices for this purpose including that of parallelism. We see often in the Bible and don't necessarily realize it. A parallel line of poetry includes half a line of text and then a second line, parallel to the first. A parallel phrase many of know well from Psalm 23—The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

Parallel lines of poetry say something about each other. The second line often elevates, supports, and carries the reader more deeply into the first line. ¹

The Lord is my Shepherd—I shall not want.

Because the Lord is my Shepherd, I want for nothing.

What does it mean for the Lord to be Shepherd of my life? It means that within the watchful care of God's love, I lack nothing.

Some lines of parallel Hebrew poetry are deeply familiar to us—we can recite them from memory. At the same time, these familiar words come to us in fresh and surprising ways in our

¹ Thomas G. Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* (Fortress Press: Philadelphia) 1989, 47-48.

most significant life-moments. All four of our verses today are parallel lines of poetry which means it is important for us to ask what the first and second lines say about each other and about us.

If we were rocks in a creek bed, and these words ran over us like water day after day, how would they shape us over time? What depth and flavor do these words offer you and me as we seek to be formed in Christ's love? How do these words metabolize within us collectively to become salt and light in our community and in the world?

Today's passage speaks to the external expression of praise and story-telling—of God's people narrating for the human community the story of God's mighty works. God's story is shared at church, but also with friends around the dinner table and across the world, on the playground and the field, at the doctor's office and among our colleagues. "What does it mean to praise and give thanks to God?" ask the first lines of verses one and two. It means we share with one another God's work in our lives.

The external expression of sharing God's work with each other and with our community presumes an internal reality in which God's presence is continually practiced. In other words, we don't just think, talk, sing about God when we are in church; rather, as Eugene Peterson says it in his paraphrase of Romans 12:2—we allow God to be present with us in our everyday, ordinary life—our sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life.

God's presence is not limited to quiet times and worship or the shiny and perfect places in our lives. God comes to us in the coffee spilled on the carpet, the sticky popsicle fingers on our clean clothes, and failed attempts to keep the house clean. God comes to us in lonely children, elderly loved ones in need of care, and unexpected requests to keep the grandchildren for a few hours. God comes to us in the shiny and the perfect, but most often in the shabby and imperfect—whispering to us "Will you allow me to be with you in this part of your day? In the cracks, imperfections, and interruptions?"

This internal reality was as strange four thousand years ago as it is today. The Israelites lived in a time of many gods, just as we do. They were called "radical monotheists", an idea that's still radical in 2020. They knew just as we do that it's much pragmatic to continually seek things like wealth, acceptance, survival, or maybe just some basic stability like a weekly meal plan and some clean laundry every once in awhile.

Continually seek God's presence? Glory in God's name?

These words are so rich, so flavorful. Glory in who's name, seek who's presence? Yahweh—the carefully layered and seasoned name for God expressing the inexpressible and radical nature of God's presence in ours.

The other day as I studied the Hebrew in which these verses were first written down, I came across something fascinating about the Hebrew word for "glory." This is a really important word to study and seek understanding of for followers of Christ. The Hebrew and Greek words for glory remind us that this word we use so often in our God-talk doesn't always mean what we think it means.

Glory in YHWH's holy name, seek YHWH's presence continually—commands given in v. 3 and 4. The word “glory” in both Hebrew and English expresses a boastful and flashy, confetti-filled praise and power. But in Hebrew, the word also alludes to divine light and warmth.

If we hear these layers in verses 3 and 4, it's as if these words say:

You will find strength and rejoicing when you allow yourself to bask in God's warmth and light.

Bask in the soul-filling, world-holding warmth of God's love; there you will find strength and rejoicing.

The hard part is that we prefer to be the source of our own strength and happiness. In striving and proving we lose touch with our souls and are so vulnerable to plugging up the cracks of imperfection in our lives where God's presence most readily comes to us. When we try to be our own source of light and life and love, we ultimately find it very difficult to be present to the truth of our own lives, let alone the presence of God.

Yet, the essence of God is presence inviting presence. “Will you let me be with here with you?” God whispers in the seemingly small and mundane.

Over the last several years, I've had the privilege hearing people in our congregation share the story of how they came to know Jesus. The common denominator in every story is relationship. If we are able to more fully and deeply follow Christ, it is only because we have people who've chosen to bear witness to God's presence in our lives by being present with us.

I'd like to tell you today about one of those people for me. In my late teens I developed a life-threatening illness. My recovery would not have been possible without the people in my life. One of those people was Bernadine. Bernadine was my therapist for two years. Bernadine served as a midwife, laboring with me through pain, despair, and weakness as God worked mightily to bring new life within my body and soul. Bernadine chose to be present with me in those shabby and imperfect days of my journey. Her presence changed my life.

Bernadine loved turtles. She had all kinds of turtles in her beautiful office. Turtles from all over the world—pictures, turtle plant holders, sculptures, I think there was even a turtle footrest. We talked often about the turtle, an ancient symbol of longevity, wisdom, patience, and strength—about learning to stand up for myself on the outside and be tender and gentle with my soul on the inside. Bernadine was wise, patient, strong, and intuitive. She shared those gifts with me. She is among my spiritual mothers.

Unfortunately, Bernadine passed away far too early and was buried on my birthday eleven years ago. Her wisdom and strength are still with me.

In 2019, a few days before the tornado here in Jefferson City, a turtle showed up in our yard. This was **big** excitement in the Coe house. The turtle was slow and shy and preferred to be under the bushes in our front yard, but one day I caught this picture of her warming herself on our driveway, basking in the warmth of the sun; allowing the light to give her energy and life.

These words in the Psalms are, for me, a rich, soul-filling feast reminding me to pause, to bask, to allow God to be present to God present with me, to fill me, to enliven me, to strengthen me—and to let this be a way of life.

Bask in the warmth of God's love,

There you will find strength and rejoicing.

Friends, let us not forget that the human community hungers and thirsts to feast around God's banquet table. When we choose to be present with what is and allow God to be present with us, we are basking in the warmth of God's love. This way of being allows us to be present with others, to see them, know them, and love them. As we do this work together in committed and intentional ways, we'll realize we are living and sharing God's story for the sake of the world—we are salt and light.

Right now, the world needs people who can be present and rooted in love. This week, I challenge you to reach out in love to the people around you with your words, actions, and presence. I challenge you to talk openly and honestly about your faith—what God is up to in your life. I challenge you to pause, breathe deeply, and be present with God and allow God to warm and fill your soul.