

The Longitude and Latitude of Gratitude

Psalm 100

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I

One of the iconic movie series of my youth was the *Back to the Future* trilogy. If you haven't seen those movies, or if it's been awhile, the basic story is that in the year 1985, an eccentric scientist named Doc Brown invents a time machine out of a sports car, and both he and his young friend Marty McFly end up traveling back and forth through time.

I saw a post on social media recently that made me chuckle. There were Doc and Marty sitting in the cockpit of the time machine, Doc was pointing to the instruments and sternly warning young Marty, "Whatever you do, don't ever set the time circuits to the year 2020."

II

Every single one of us has lost something important to us in this year of 2020. Some of us have lost once-in-a-lifetime rites of passage like graduations and proms. Some of us have lost long-anticipated trips and reunions with family and friends. In this bitter election year, in this season of corrosive partisanship, in this season of renewed conversations about race, justice, and the social contract, some of us have even lost relationships.

The global pandemic has unleashed some type of loss on every single person with whom we share this planet. And some losses have been far more severe than others – like the loss of income, the loss of health and vitality, and even the loss of life.

And as a general rule, we human beings don't like to lose things, even things that might seem trivial or insignificant, because to be human is to form attachments, and when those attachments get broken, it causes us pain, anger, sadness, despair, and grief.

So many of us are enduring losses these days, and so many of us are fearful about what the future might hold, not just for our nation or for our community, but for those things that are the most precious to us – the people we hold most dear.

The fear and the grief are so very potent these days. And we're left wondering, is there something that can take the edge off? Because it seems like we all need something more than to just buck up and keep a stiff upper lip. Is there something that can smooth

the sharp, jagged edges of all of the pain and heartache this year continues to serve up? Because it seems like we all need something more than to just grin and bear it.

And that something that can take the edge off the fear, that something that can soothe the pain, lies at the heart of Psalm 100 that is before us today.

III

This summer, we've been preaching our way through the Book of Psalms, which, as we've said all along, isn't a book at all in the classical sense, but rather an anthology, a collection of poems and prayers and hymns that were composed and compiled over a very long period of time in biblical history. Not only are they God's Word to us, but they're our words to God, and they function like the prayer book and the hymnal of our ancestors in faith.

And indeed, Psalm 100 sounds like a hymn, or perhaps instructions for those entering the temple to worship. So listen now for a Word from God from Psalm 100.

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.

Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing.

Know that the Lord is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name.

For the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

I've always imagined that this psalm was originally composed for use in the Temple in Jerusalem. Remember, for our ancient ancestors, the Temple was not just a house of worship. It was considered to be the very dwelling place of God on earth. In its day, it was probably the most impressive and grand structure in the known world.

I imagine that when our ancient ancestors went up to the Temple to worship, it was a joyful noise from all over the earth. I think perhaps it might have looked something like John of Patmos' vision in the Book of Revelation, when he writes, "I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the

Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

I think about what it sounded like up here on Christmas Eve, when this room was packed full, and you all sang *O Come All Ye Faithful*. Make a joyful noise indeed.

But this psalm sounds different to my ears today. For more than 20 Sundays, these pews have been almost entirely empty. The pandemic has exiled most of us away from this house of worship for a season. The year 2020 has been a year of loss for every single one of us, and who knows what is yet to come?

And so I thought again about the Temple in Jerusalem, and about what happened to it about 600 years before Christ. About 600 years before the birth of Christ, Jerusalem was invaded, the Temple was destroyed, and thousands of our ancestors were exiled from the Land of Promise. Along with the story of the exodus, the story of loss and exile is one of the dominant themes of the entire Old Testament.

And I wonder. Did the psalmist compose Psalm 100 while singing in the Temple, when times were good? Or did the psalmist compose Psalm 100 while in sitting in exile, when times were so very, very hard?

Because it's easy to worship and sing praise to God on the mountaintop. It's easy to claim the name of Christ when it doesn't cost very much. It's another thing altogether to give thanks to God from the shadow of the valley of death. It's another thing altogether to claim the name of Christ when the cross comes into view.

And as I sat with Psalm 100 this week, as I tried to reconcile all of these major chords and triumphant sounds of worship and praise and thanksgiving that sound so off-key in the middle of a global pandemic and civil unrest and bitter divisiveness and so much pain and grief, I started to wonder – what if the psalmist wrote Psalm 100 from a place of exile? And what if it has wisdom for you and me today?

IV

What if the antidote to all of that fear that you're experiencing is not necessarily to just buck up and keep a stiff upper lip. What if the antidote to all of that grief is not necessarily to just pull yourself up by your bootstraps and get over it? What if there is something in this psalm that can take some of the sting out of the grief and take the edge off of your fear and anxiety?

Know that the Lord is God. It is he that made us, and we are his. So enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, and bless his name.

What if the psalmist wasn't writing from the mountain, but from the valley?

I don't think the psalmist is telling us that it will all be pie in the sky in the sweet bye and bye. I don't think the psalmist is telling us to just believe in the power of positive thinking. I think the psalmist is showing us the latitude and longitude where we can find a balm for our frightened and weary souls. The psalmist is showing us the power of gratitude.

You and I live in a culture and an economic system that thrives on the idea of private ownership. We show that we own our home by producing the deed to the property. We show that we own a car by producing the title to the vehicle. We show that we own assets by producing a statement from the bank.

And all of that is fine and good. But the biblical truth is that you and I don't own a thing. Because the Lord is God. It is he that made us, and we are his.

And that means that every single thing that you have, every single relationship that is important to you, everything you are, everything you will be, does not ultimately belong to you. Everything you have, and everything you are, is a gift from God who loves you so much that God did not withhold God's only son from you, a gift from God who would rather go to the cross for you than live without you.

And when you come to that biblical understanding, that everything belongs to God and God loves you and entrusts people and things to you for a season, well, it doesn't completely eliminate the pain of losses past, nor does it completely dissolve the fear of loss to come. But gratitude can take some of the sting away. Gratitude can feed you in the wilderness. Gratitude can comfort you when you walk through the valley of the shadow of death. Gratitude can be the antivenom for your

My friend, I know that this has been a hard year. You have already lost so much that you value, and more may be yet to come. But even so, I hope you'll find the strength to give thanks for the gifts that God has poured into you. Give thanks to him, and bless his name, even if it's for something as simple as the fact that at this very moment you have air in your lungs and blood in your veins. For the Lord is God – it is he that made us, and we are his, and there is nothing, neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in call creation, that can ever separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus your Lord.

V

The year 2020 was supposed to be a big one in the life of First Presbyterian Church. It seems like it was a lifetime ago that we gathered on the front steps to ring the church bell 200 times to ring in our bicentennial year. Celebration plans that were more than five years in the making have had to be reworked and rescheduled or scrapped altogether.

We're all tired of livestream worship services and Zoom classes and meetings. We all miss the casual conversations over a cup of coffee in the Atrium, the handshakes and the unmasked smiles. We lament that we have not been able to safely gather in this room and give witness to the resurrection for sisters and brothers who have died and joined the Church Triumphant. We have lost much that we value, and it is perfectly natural and appropriate to grieve those losses.

But let us remember the wisdom of Psalm 100, which leads us to the latitude and longitude of gratitude. Let us be a church that is faithful enough not to just praise God from the mountaintop, but that gives thanks even in the valley.

I don't imagine many of us would like to travel through time and do much of 2020 again.

But even so, we know this: the Lord is God, and the Lord is good; his steadfast love endures forever.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.