

“Enter His Gates with Thanksgiving” (fn.:Sermon 1-26-2020 Pender.docx)

Scripture: Psalm 100

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Today’s sermon is not the “closing argument” and it is not my “last lecture.” Instead, I am turning to poetry...the poetry of Psalm 100. Arguments and lectures are great exercises for the mind...but poetry addresses the spirit and the soul. You may know that the word “poet” is the Greek word for “maker.” And my focus today is simply this—what kind of life does the poem we call “Psalm 100” make...make for me...for you...for us. Listen again to Psalm 100:

- ¹ *Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth.*
- ² *Worship the LORD with gladness;
come into his presence with singing.*
- ³ *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.*
- ⁴ *Enter his gates with thanksgiving,
and his courts with praise.
Give thanks to him, bless his name.*
- ⁵ *For the LORD is good;
his steadfast love endures forever,
and his faithfulness to all generations.*

Come into God’s presence...show up for worship—that’s the call of Psalm 100. Worship is about showing up to be in God’s presence. And the question is not whether God will be present—God IS here. The question is whether we are present. When we are present, here is what happens: worship provides the structure for one of the most fundamental human purposes—to grow.

Growth—fundamental to who we are. Consider just our physical existence: our bodies never stop growing—hair grows, waistlines grow, new skin grows to cover cuts and scratches. And that threat we call “cancer” is not the lack of growth but rather the unfocused, unfettered growth that kills. When our bodies quit growing healthily and adapting, life is over.

And, likewise, our fuller self as body and spirit—of flesh and soul—is meant for growth. John Calvin noted that no one on this side of the grave graduates from the school of Christ—that is, we are always in the education mode. Indeed, one of the basic meanings of “disciple” is that of “learner” or “pupil.”

Worship provides the structure for growth. Structure has a sort of good news/bad news sort of feel. That is, structure both guides and restrains. Good news—guides; bad news—restrains. Let me give a simple, gardening analogy; when I had a vegetable garden, I found that tomato plants had a mission to grow—to spread out and spring multiple vines...but, let alone, the tomatoes would then be on the ground, where they would develop rot. And if I allowed a multitude of vines, the tomatoes would be puny. However, if I surrounded the tomato plant with a cage and if I pinched back some of those vines, then the tomato production was bountiful and harvestable. That’s structure—restrains and guides.

Worship provides structure—there are limits, boundaries, patterns—that support the best growth. The Sunday after my father died I was driving home to Knoxville. Sunday morning...that is a time for worship. So I pulled off the road and went to a random Presbyterian Church. I needed the structure and boundaries. The opening hymn was *Morning Has Broken*, one of my mother's favorite hymns. We sang a modern gospel hymn titled, *Soon and Very Soon*: "Soon and very soon, we are going to see the King." My eyes flooded with tears when we came to the verse, "No more dying there, we are going to see the King." Worship provided the structure—both a guide and restraint.

Come into the presence of God—that's the poetic world that Psalm 100 makes. We are made for worship. Moreover, we are made for worship together. Psalm 100 does not in any way imagine an individual journey of the spirit and the soul. Worship happens in community. The pronouns are all first-person plural: we and us.

But community is tough—we are not always happy with each other; we do not see things the same way; we bear hurts and shames that we do not readily acknowledge. In some ways, we all struggle with the "Greta Garbo Syndrome"—Greta Garbo was an early Hollywood star who was noted for her assertion that she wanted to be alone...to be let alone. Most anyone who has known pain or shame knows this syndrome. We want to be alone.

But, as another Biblical poet puts it in Genesis, "It is not good for us be alone." And so the poetry of Psalm 100 makes a new world: We are God's people, the sheep of God's pasture. As much as I love that old gospel hymn, "In the Garden," I know there something off in that chorus about being "alone" in the garden and that the joys in the garden are mine alone that "no one has ever known." No, it is in and among the sheep that we have the best opportunity to see the Shepherd.

Seeing the Shepherd—that moves us close to the mystical experience that is beyond any realities we know. Mystics see beyond the ordinary and the mundane. Now I am not a mystic—someone with that depth of connection to God. I struggle with prayer; I have lots of doubts. But I am drawn to mystics—they help me to see where my vision is limited. In some ways, it is like those pictures that hide another picture within. I often don't see the hidden picture until someone points it out to me. Mystics help me to see.

Thomas Merton was a mystic—a towering figure of the 20th century. He was a Trappist monk. He probably is the only mystic that has a historical marker for one of his visions: 4th and Walnut in downtown Louisville, Kentucky! My children will tell you how I love to read historical markers. And, of course, how wonderful to serve a church that has a historical marker just outside the door of the Sanctuary!



On the front of the bulletin, there is a picture from downtown Louisville—a picture of a historical marker dedicated to Thomas Merton. One side reads:

A Revelation: Merton had a sudden insight at this corner Mar. 18, 1958, that led him to redefine his monastic identity with greater involvement in social justice issues. He was "suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all these people..." he found them "walking around shining like the sun." *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander.*

Let me read you the fuller autobiographical reflection by Merton:

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. . . . I have the immense joy of being [hu]man, a member of a race in which God . . . became incarnate. As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now [that] I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! . . . they are all walking around shining like the sun. . . . Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God's eyes. If only they could all see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time.¹

Merton saw what the poet of Psalm 100 saw: We all are God's people, the sheep of God's pasture. And he experienced that in the heart of Louisville...an experience (may God grant) that will continue to happen right here at the corner of Church and State in downtown Knoxville!

So, (1) worship is where we come into God's presence; (2) where we are present with each other...present in all our messiness, in all our peculiarities. And (3) together we have the occasion for seeing the Shepherd.

And the final thing in Psalm 100 is "Thanks." The poetic world of Psalm 100 keeps pressing "the attitude of gratitude" upon us: "Enter his gates with thanksgiving...give thanks...bless his name...for the Lord is good."

Gratitude is what the Apostle Paul addressed with the disciples—the learners—in Thessalonica. He wrote: "Give thanks in all circumstances." (1 Thess. 5:18) All circumstances...we just don't know enough to live without gratitude.

I recall how the Dutch woman, Corrie Ten Boom, experienced this gratitude. Corrie and the rest of her family experienced the German occupation of the Netherlands during World War II. In their home, they provided sanctuary to Jewish neighbors and were caught and arrested by the Gestapo. She and her sister Betsie were separated from their parents and ended up in the notorious prison of Ravensbruck. There, the two sisters, Betsie and Corrie talked about Paul's words to "give thanks in all circumstances." There was so much wrong in their lives—they were separated from their parents (who would die as Holocaust victims), they were in prison for doing a good thing, and the conditions were horrendous. Betsie insisted that they needed to be thankful for all things. Corrie responded that she could be thankful for most things...but not the fleas! She couldn't be thankful for the fleas that infested their barracks. Even though Betsie insisted that they were to be thankful in all circumstances, Corrie could not do so. Later, Corrie learned that what Betsie and she took as good fortune—that in their barracks, they had relative freedom and were not bothered by the guards—that freedom was due to the fleas. The guards would not enter their barracks because of the fleas...the same guards who abused so many of the women prisoners—but only the barracks without fleas! The fleas preserved them.

¹ Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Doubleday: 1966), 140-142.

Following World War II, Corrie Ten Boom often told this story in worship settings—she would do so while holding up a piece of needlework. The fabric was filled with knots, tangles, and stray ends. She would read a poem about God, the master weaver. And, at the end of the poem, she would flip the fabric around to show a beautiful tapestry of gold and royal blue. On one side were the knots, the tangles, and stray ends, but here on the flip side was exquisite beauty. Corrie Ten Boom had seen the tangles and knots in the barracks at Ravensbruck, but she now had the eyes of a mystic—she sees as God sees...the beautiful tapestry of gold and royal blue that God, the Master Weaver, was about in the fabric of our lives.

The poetic world of Psalm 100 invites us to claim gratitude...even when we cannot see as the mystic does. To trust that the Lord is good and faithful through all generations...through all circumstances.

Now, you may have noticed that I have left out one aspect of Psalm 100...the opening words: “Make a joyful noise.” Our Music Director and Organist, Mark Pace has been so kind to have the choir sing three of my favorite choral pieces:

- Mendelssohn’s “He Watching over Israel”—an allusion to Psalm 121 that begins “I lift up my eyes to the hills” and centers on God’s keeping...God’s keeping Israel and us...God’s keeping our lives...God’s keeping our going out and coming in.
- The anthem was “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” with that forceful reminder by the bass section that “Truth is Marching.” When warfare and strife seem loudest and overwhelming, God’s truth is still marching.
- And, then the offertory will be Randall Thompson’s “Alleluia.” The lyrics are easy to memorize—just that one word, “Alleluia.” “Alleluia” is the Hebrew word for Praise Yahweh...literally “Praise Yah” or “Praise Jehovah/Lord!” Randall Thompson, the composer, had been commissioned to write a celebratory fanfare—something with a loud and boisterous tone, but the year was 1940; France and other European countries had fallen to the Nazi German war machine that seemed unstoppable. It was a dark, dark time in world history...so how to sing “Alleluia” in such a time? Thompson’s “Alleluia” is circumspect, reflective, and guarded... but still praises God.

I am convinced that our most faithful theology...our profoundest trust...must have music. And if I could not find a song, a hymn, or musical piece to go with a sermon, then the sermon was not ready to be preached! And sometimes the repertoire God uses can be broader than our sacred music collection. Sometimes “Singing in the Rain” has been as significant to me as “Blessed Assurance.” So, let me say the following: “Thanks for the memories,” as comedian Bob Hope sang. And “Happy trails to you until we meet again,” as that Presbyterian couple Roy Rogers and Dale Evans used to sing. Or, as we have in our hymnal: “God be with you till we meet again.” Keep finding and making that joyful noise.