

“How Wide and Long is God’s Love!”

February 24th, 2019

Psalm 103

Epiphany 7

How much poetry do you read? If you’re like most adults in the United States, it’s probably not a lot. According to a 2012 survey, only 6.7% of adult Americans had read poetry in the last 12 months.ⁱ That’s not a very high number. That means about one of every 20 of us had read any poetry in any form during the last year. In a more recent survey from 2017, the number goes up a bit to 11.7% of adult Americans.ⁱⁱ That number is going up, and I think that’s a good thing, because as we talked about last weekend, one of the most important books of the Bible is pure poetry. Even more than that, about 75% of the Old Testament is poetry. I know that poetry is not a very popular form of reading in our culture right now, but you have to face the fact that *your God is a poet*. Reading some poetry every now and then could help you understand what is going on in these sections of the Bible.

Today, we’re going to look another Psalm. This psalm is one of the most well-known in the entire world, but before we get to it, I want to take just a peak at the psalm that comes right before it. The book of Psalms is arranged the way it is on purpose. When we look at Psalm 102, it will make a lot of sense why Psalm 103 is where it is in the book. Psalm 103 is filled with joy and praise for God and his love for us. It’s going to use imagery that we can understand, and yet like good poetry, it will inspire wonder in us. But, Psalm 102 is different. The heading on that psalm says, “**A prayer of an afflicted person who has grown weak and pours out a lament before the LORD**” (Psalm 102:1). Most psalms don’t tell us why they were written. They might give some information about the music to use or the historical circumstances, but none give us instructions like this. If you are weary and weak, and you can do nothing else but pour out the saddest song of your heart to God, then this is the psalm for you.

Listen to some verses from this psalm: **“¹ Hear my prayer, Lord; let my cry for help come to you. ² Do not hide your face from me when I am in distress. Turn your ear to me; when I call, answer me quickly. [...] ⁹ I eat ashes as my food and mingle my drink with tears ¹⁰ because of your great wrath, for you have taken me up and thrown me aside. ¹¹ My days are like the evening shadow; I wither away like grass. [...] In the course of my life he broke my strength; he cut short my days. ²⁴ So I said: ‘Do not take me away, my God, in the midst of my days; your years go on through all generations. ²⁵ In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. ²⁶ They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. Like clothing you will change them and they will be discarded”** (Psalm 102). These are words of a broken hearted person who has no strength left except to call out to God.

Even though poetry might be sad, it can still be beautiful, and Psalm 102 is beautiful. It was put in your Bible for you to use. No matter what difficulties might have made you afflicted and weak, wanting to pour out a lament, this psalm is here for you to pray back to your God. These

times will come. That's what it means to live in a sinful world. We live in a world that is broken. In a world where loved ones hurt us. In a world where we see tragedies around every corner. And we are not innocent observers. You've played your own part in all of this. You are a sinner who has caused others pain and suffering in the things you have done and not done. It is from your own sinful, weak flesh that diseases spring up. It is from your own darkened heart that sinful desires come to life and demand to be fulfilled. In all of these times, whether you are afflicted by your own sin, or the sin of others, remember that Psalm 102 is here for you. But, don't forget that it is followed up by Psalm 103.

“Praise the Lord, my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the Lord, my soul, and forget not all his benefits—who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s” (Psalm 103:1-5). Doesn't it make so much sense that after a time of affliction has passed that we would praise God for bringing us out of it? That's exactly what King David does in this psalm. He breaks out in praise for God. He praises God that he has taken away his affliction and shown him mercy.

God does not take delight in the pain and suffering of his children. It's true that our sins anger him, and that anger is something to be feared, but his anger does not last. If it did, we would all be wiped out. But instead—how wide and long is God's love! Can you imagine how far the east is from the west? It's almost a nonsensical question. We can probably measure the exact distance from the north pole to the south pole, but you can't do that for east and west. They can go on infinitely in separate directions. That's exactly how wide God's love is. We can probably measure from the ground up to the end of the atmosphere, but how far does space go? I have no idea. I think only God knows, but it doesn't matter. It's so big that it might as well be infinite. That's exactly how long God's love is. It knows no bounds. It never ends.

“The LORD works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed. He made known his ways to Moses, his deeds to the people of Israel: The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us” (Psalm 103:6-12).

Even those difficulties that God sends into our lives are not God's anger. If you are a parent, you know how this is. When your child does something wrong, or breaks a rule, or something like that, you can't just let it go. You can't say, “Do whatever you want, I guess.” That sort of treatment is not love. Love is tough. It does hard things. God's love is the same. The book of Hebrews tells us: **“Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! They disciplined us for a**

little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness” (Hebrews 12:7-10).

The hardships that God allows into our lives, while not pleasant, are a sign of his love. He is forming you as a father does his dear child. He is bringing you closer to himself. Deepening his connection to you. That’s exactly what David points out in this Psalm. Do you want to be able to endure when life is hard? Remember this: **“As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust. The life of mortals is like grass, they flourish like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more. But from everlasting to everlasting the LORD’s love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children’s children—with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts. The LORD has established his throne in heaven, and his kingdom rules over all”** (Psalm 103:13-19).

Do you want to know how to rejoice in your afflictions? Do you want to know how to get from Psalm 102 to Psalm 103, turning your trials into praise? It’s by remembering the Lord’s mercy and compassion and love and grace, his righteousness, his covenant, and every Word he has spoken. The love of the Father is high and long, so vast and infinite that he did not even spare his own Son for you. He brought him to the cross and satisfied his anger on him. Jesus Christ the Son accepted that, endured it, and rose above it because his love for you. Your God rules over the hardships of this earthly life. He has risen above them. It’s no wonder the Psalm ends the way it does: **“Praise the LORD, you his angels, you mighty ones who do his bidding, who obey his word. Praise the LORD, all his heavenly hosts, you his servants who do his will. Praise the LORD, all his works everywhere in his dominion. Praise the LORD, my soul”** (Psalm 103:20-22).

I want to give you an opportunity to do just what this Psalm says. On our church website, there’s a place for you to go and write your own psalm of praise. I don’t know all of the trials and difficulties. I don’t know everything the Lord has brought you through, but here’s an opportunity for you to write your own psalm and make it very personal to your own experience. All you have to do is go on our website (or saintpeterlutheran.org/psalms) and there will be the picture there that you see on the cover of your bulletin. Underneath that is a box where you can type in your psalm, as long or as short as you want it to be. Those psalms will be emailed to me, but it’ll be completely anonymous. The value in this is that you’ll be doing exactly what God recommends. You’ll spend time reflecting on how much God loves you, and I will get to see all the things that you are thankful for. To help you remember all of this, on the table in the narthex is a little card with instructions to help you. Take this opportunity to praise your God. His love for you is so wide and long. Amen.

ⁱ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/04/24/poetry-is-going-extinct-government-data-show/?utm_term=.45a8988b14d5

ⁱⁱ <https://www.arts.gov/artistic-fields/research-analysis/arts-data-profiles/arts-data-profile-18>