

The Compassionate Lord

Psalm 103

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There are several ways to approach Psalm 103. One is to see the emphasis on “all” in the psalm. God rules over *all* and does *all* good things for *all* who are in need. God is to be praised by *all* creatures and things with *all* their being (“all that is within me”). The psalm even has twenty-two lines. That’s the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet. That suggests that the psalm writer intends to say it *all* (J. Clinton McCann, “The Book of Psalms,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*).

We could start in the middle of the psalm and look at God’s character of steadfast love and compassion. We can see how God’s character is revealed in God’s reign and in how God cares for and blesses all creation, including us.

We could look at the human response to who God is and what God does. We’re to fear the LORD, that is, keep his covenant and remember to do what he commands. The idea of remembering is important in the psalm. It’s like the psalm writer is reminding himself to praise the LORD, telling himself—and us—not to forget what God has done. As the LORD remembers who we are and what we’re like, we need to remember who God is, what God is like, and what God has done.

One reason we have Holy Communion is that we have lousy memories. We need to be reminded, we need to re-enact the gospel, we need to remember. Jesus said that when we eat the bread and drink the cup that are signs of his body and blood we are to remember him: “Do this in remembrance of me” (Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26).

The psalm writer wouldn’t have known about the Lord’s Supper/Holy Communion. But the Psalms were part of the background for Jesus and the New Testament writers. The tradition that formed the liturgy we use for Communion tried to take into account the whole biblical story. None of them may have had Psalm 103 specifically in mind, but I don’t think it’s too much of a stretch to see some connections. So I want to look at what we

pray in Communion and point out where the psalm ties in or may be reflected in the liturgy.

Forgiveness is a key element in Communion. Following the invitation to the table, we're invited to confess our sins and then we hear words of pardon and assurance.

The psalm starts with a reminder to bless the LORD and not to forget all his benefits. Listing those benefits, it begins with "who forgives all your iniquity." Later it tells us that God does not treat us as our *sins* deserve or repay us according to our *iniquities* and that he removes our *transgressions* from us as far as the east is from the west. That's how God deals with all our idolatry, rebellion, disobedience, sin, wrongdoing. Everything we're guilty of, the sins that cause us shame—God is willing to forgive them and remove them.

Even as we confess our sin and ask for forgiveness, we commit to walking in God's way and trust that God will set us free for joyful obedience. Forgiveness is not a free pass to do whatever we feel like. It's the mercy that no longer holds the past against us. It's the miracle of new beginning. It's the grace of a new relationship. And it calls us to give ourselves in love to this gracious and loving Lord. When the psalm talks about fearing the LORD, it doesn't mean being terrified by his anger. "Those who fear the LORD" are the people "who seek to make the LORD the decisive orienting center of their lives. The fear of the LORD is simply reverence practiced in trust and obedience" (James L. Mays, "Psalms," *Interpretation Commentary*).

Thanksgiving follows confession, forgiveness, and commitment to new life. The main prayer we pray during Communion is called "The Great Thanksgiving." Another term for the Lord's Supper/Holy Communion is *Eucharist*, which means giving thanks. We ought always to thank the one who died for us.

Several times the psalm says to bless the LORD. We usually think of God as the one who blesses. But the word bless can refer to both the gift given and gratitude for the gift. We bless the LORD by thanking God for his gifts, "all his benefits," and praising God for who he is.

The Great Thanksgiving helps us recall God's grace and blessing in *creation and in Israel's story*. And it reminds us that Israel's story is our story as well.

The psalm tells us not to forget all the LORD's benefits, including forgiveness, healing, redemption, life, love, compassion, satisfaction, renewal, righteousness and justice for all the oppressed. The salvation God offers is comprehensive. Forgiveness is at the heart of it and it includes all these other benefits in various ways in this life. The life to come in the fullness of God's kingdom will include all these benefits overflowing for and in us.

We see ourselves in Israel's story. The psalm lifts up an important scene in that story. When it says the LORD works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed and that he made known his ways to Moses and the people of Israel, it's referring to the exodus from Egypt. That's when God rescued the people from slavery, led them through the wilderness, and made covenant with them.

The specific scene in the background here is in Exodus 32-34. Moses has been on the mountain with God for some time. The people get restless, wondering where he is and what he's doing. They convince Aaron to make an idol, a golden calf, for them to worship. He does. Up on the mountain, God tells Moses about this and threatens to wipe out the whole nation. Moses pleads for the people and God relents. Then, Moses returns to the people and finds them partying around the golden calf. In anger, he throws down the stone tablets that the Ten Commandments are written on, breaking them and symbolizing how the people have broken the covenant. Moses grinds up the golden calf, puts the dust in water, and makes the people drink it. Then he calls for those who are on the LORD's side to join him. The Levites come to him and he orders them to kill the people who worshiped the golden calf.

Moses goes back up the mountain to meet with God. He confesses the people's sin and begs God to forgive them and to continue going with them on their journey. God says he will. Moses asks to see God's glory. God tells him he will make all his goodness pass in front of Moses and will proclaim his name, that is, his character to Moses. Moses can't see God, but

he can hide in a cleft in the rock and see sort of the trailing edge of God's glory. After Moses chisels out two new stone tablets,

the LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the LORD. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished...." (Ex 34:6-7)

Then God renews the covenant with Moses and the people of Israel.

That's in the background of the psalm. And the psalm actually quotes that proclamation of the LORD's character:

He made his ways known 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.

That's the God we praise. We sing to God, "Holy, holy, holy Lord...." Then we remember how God came to us in Jesus and what Jesus did to reveal God and restore us to God. In Jesus we see the fullness of God's steadfast love and compassion or mercy.

The psalm uses two great words to describe God that are in the Exodus story and in several other psalms. The LORD is compassionate or merciful. The Hebrew scholars tell us that the word there is a form of the word for "womb." This reminds us that God loves God's children as a mother loves the child in her womb. We have an example of this in our family as our daughter Rachel and her husband Zach are expecting their first child, our first grandchild, in September. We love that baby already, but Rachel has a special love, a special relationship with him. Can you believe God loves you in that way?

The other big word the psalm uses to describe God is a word we've heard several times already in the Psalms. It's the word that means lovingkindness or steadfast love or faithful covenant love. The psalm tries to describe the LORD's love and compassion. God's love for us is higher than the heavens. God's compassion is like a father's for his children.

The love fathers and mothers are supposed to have for their children is the love God has for those who have reverence for him, trust him, and follow his ways. I learn a lot about God by being a parent. Being a father brings out the best in me. It can also bring out the worst in me. Now, we're not saying that God is a human parent projected on a big screen. God is not just like us, only bigger. God is unique. Whatever good qualities we see in our parents or in ourselves as parents come from God. We often fail to represent the image of God, the love and compassion of God. That's one reason we need to be forgiven.

But God is always faithful, loving, compassionate. And *God remembers how frail we are*. God made us and he remembers that we are dust. We remind ourselves of that fact on Ash Wednesday: "Remember you are dust and to dust you will return." Mortal life is short. We're frail and weak. "But from everlasting to everlasting the LORD's love is with those" who have trusting reverence for him, and God's righteous is from generation to generation. *God's throne is established and God rules over all. We remember that as we pray in anticipation of God's heavenly banquet and new creation.*

The psalm started with a call to bless the LORD with "all my inmost being," "all that is within me." In the Communion prayer we offer ourselves, all that we are, to God in union with Christ's sacrifice.

The psalm concludes with calling on angels and all the heavenly hosts, everything everywhere to bless the LORD, to thank and praise him. And one more time, we tell ourselves, "Bless the LORD, my soul."

The Communion prayer concludes with giving God thanks and praise through Christ, with the Holy Spirit, in the church. We declare that all honor and glory belong to the LORD God, now and forever. We praise the LORD, who reigns over all and who is loving and faithful, compassionate and merciful. We invite everyone and everything to join in blessing the name of the LORD.