

He Makes Storms Be Still

Psalm 107: 17-32

**First Presbyterian Church
2022
Baton Rouge, Louisiana
Dawson**

January 23, AD

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Today we're taking up the second half of Psalm 107. We saw last week that this some contains four stories of people who got into dire trouble. They cried out to the LORD and were delivered. So the refrain throughout the psalm reminds us, "Let us give thanks to the LORD our God, for he is good. His steadfast love endures forever. Let the redeemed of the LORD say so." When we know the deliverance of the Triune God of grace, we are called to make a sacrifice of praise. We offer him our lives in gratitude. By how we live, what we do and the way we energetically and creatively give him thanks through worship. And this is not just an individual, private exercise. The community of the redeemed are summoned to tell their stories to each other with shouts of joy. So with that in mind, let's take a look at the next two mini-stories.

3) *"Some were fools through their sinful ways, and because of their iniquities suffered affliction; they loathed any kind of food, and they drew near to the gates of death."* The suffering here seems to be from illness related to sinful choices. I've told you often of my grandmother's tremendous concern about germs and poor hygiene. Her attitude makes a lot more sense to me since we've been going through the pandemic. My grandmother had a young daughter during the deadly Spanish flu epidemic in 1918. Millions were dying within a day or two of contracting this virus. I understand more now why she would be so cautious about germs. But she had a particular attitude about sick people that went with her concern. Sick people were morally suspect. If somebody sneezed near her, she would look at them with a withering disdain. Perhaps even adding an audible, disgusted sigh. Only reprobates get sick, and only the worst of the worst show visible signs of illness in public. If I got sick, her first question would be, "I wonder where you caught that." Somehow, if I caught even a cold, I had failed morally.

That seems ridiculous. But in a subtler way, we do it all the time. What's the first question you ask if you hear someone got Covid? Of course, "Were they vaccinated?" Then it's only a hop, skip and a jump for the thought to creep in that they *deserved* to contract Covid for not being vaccinated like the rest of us. We are morally superior. Look, I'm triple vaxed and if asked, I'll share my opinion on the medical advantages. But when the spirit of my grandmother creeps in, however subtly, that someone deserves this illness, I'd better repent of my self-righteousness.

In the past, this kind of thinking has had dire consequences for the church. Way too many Christians just missed it during the AIDS crisis of the 80's and 90's. We didn't minister to those who contracted that withering disease. After all, people got it from doing what they shouldn't, so if we care for them, aren't we condoning their behavior? I know I felt that way, and I'm ashamed of it. Little wonder we're often slapped with the judgmental label. Rather, we're called to remember our common sinfulness so we can express the attitude of a savior who showed uncommon compassion to any in need.

That said, the story in our psalm does link people suffering in body as a result of wrong choices. And we know this to be so. "They loathed any kind of food." We think of how certain drug addictions ruin the appetite for good things. Eating disorders reflect a tortured struggle to deal with wounds in the soul. Sometimes to deal with a sense of unworthiness, sometimes to make atonement. Young bodies which should be healthy are wracked with pain. In our distortions, we turn from that which should nourish us. Sexually transmitted diseases wreck our health and remind us constantly that God was serious in reserving sexual intimacy for marriage. Self-harm gives a moment of relief, a temporary illusion of being in control, or even helps someone who has gone numb to feel again. But the shame, and the harm become all too destructive over time. Addictions to painkillers, alcohol or cocaine can turn the body against itself. What begins as free choices can become destructive compulsions.

Less dramatically but no less serious are the very lifestyles we lead. We run ourselves ragged. We pump ourselves up with caffeine and then calm ourselves down with alcohol or sleeping pills. We drive ourselves without getting adequate rest. We scarf junk food on the run and begin even

to turn away from healthy food. We compromise our immune systems by the stress we bear. We strain our hearts and knot up our muscles. We receive consequences for living in ways that are unsustainable in these bodies.

Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He sent out his word and healed them, and delivered them from their destruction.

The psalm calls us to come out of isolation and cry out to our God. Illness and addiction can be so isolating. We get caught in a terrible self-loop of condemnation. Healing begins when from the guts of our souls we call to the LORD to save us.

Some of us have known what it is to come out the other side of terrible addictions. We have seen the remarkable forgiveness of our bodies for the abuse we gave them. We have learned to live with a healthy relationship to food. We have received the healing of the Lord through medicines, changed life styles and spiritual cleansing. We have received even heart attacks as gifts which caused us to wake up before it was too late. We have learned to live in new ways. The Psalm encourages us to make a sacrifice of praise for such restoration.

Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love, for his wondrous works to the children of men! Let the redeemed of the LORD say so!

4) *“Some went down to the sea in ships, doing business on the great waters; they saw the deeds of the LORD, his wondrous works in the deep.”* These were the ones who did great commerce on the seas. They ruled the market place with their savvy and their daring. But upon the waters, they saw real power. They saw how puny they were compared to the power of the LORD as he made the seas to rise like a mountain toward heaven, and then plunge downward as if to the very depths. The courage of these great men melted. They reached their wits end.

How well we know this along the Gulf Coast! We do our business in fair weather and seem to be in control of our lives. We can make pieces move. We can make deals happen. We can jet across the continents and

send tankers across the far seas. We can talk by cell phone to a client in China, or video conference with partners in South America. Our commerce is a wonder of power exercised in a focused way. But in a few short hours Katrina, then Gustav, then the BP oil spill, then the 2016 floods, then Covid, then Ida dealt us blows from which we are endlessly recovering. All our pride came to naught. All the power of the mightiest nation in the world cannot save us from disasters. We are not in control. Our power is actually very limited. Sooner or later, the strongest will meet his match. Our frailty and the frailty of our infrastructure will strike. How fragile we are!

And of course these swelling seas and mighty winds occur in much more ordinary ways as well. I sometimes think if we were really knew how perilous it is just to drive on our streets, we might not ever go out. We hurtle about in little cans made of plastic and steel without thinking how one slip of the hand, one moment of scattered attention or one failure of our machines can send us hurtling to ruin.

We know how financial positions can become unstable so quickly. Rising and falling like storm-tossed waves on the sea. A steady market can crash. A great investment can become debt called in just when we are most over-extended. A major unexpected house repair does not often wait until we have saved ample money. A swindle can take us by surprise and erode all our stability.

The same is true of our sense of peace and well being. Suddenly we realize that all the projects are coming due at once. When it rains it pours and we can quickly lose any margins we had. We're living on the ragged edge of exhaustion, stressed to the max and terrified that everything is going to collapse. Yes, we are fragile and frail. Our confidence gets easily shaken.

Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble and he delivered them from their distress. He made the storm be still, and the waves of the sea were hushed.

Sometimes the best thing that could happen to us is to have our props kicked out from under us. Because a sense of security so quickly becomes complacency about needing to trust a sovereign God: we're doing just fine without him. Complacency becomes pride and a sense of superiority. We're not like the rest of the masses. We have this game figured out. And

superiority leads to isolation. We fail to build reliable, trusting, vulnerable relations. But when the bubble bursts, we're sent back to God and others. When our pride gets knocked, we get open again to the relationships for which we were created.

So we learn again and again who is really in control. That transforms us. We reach our wits' end and collapse in a puddle of tears and frustration. We drop to our knees in helplessness. We are not the lords of the universe. We are not the captains of our destiny. We are just frail children of dust and as feeble as frail. What a mercy it is to realize that! What freedom to stop trying to do God's job and let him be God. What peace to lean back on the everlasting arms. We can stop being so frantic, so demanding, so demeaning, so frustrated and annoyed all the time. The LORD God reigns, and God is good, and we are his people.

To realize that elevates us above the anxiety in a fearful world all around us. But it also creates the humility that enables us to be compassionate to those who are suffering. To those who have been tossed by swelling seas not of their own devising. And also, especially, to those who have messed up their lives by their own choices. By their own stupid fault. We share a common sinfulness with them. So we can move to share the love of the common savior of all.

Our Psalm tells us: Let us offer sacrifices of thanksgiving and tell of his deeds in songs of joy! That's what it means to offer a sacrifice of praise. To be willing to speak. To pray. To open our mouths to sing. This is the spirit in which we make offerings at church—we give something back to God as a symbol of thanks for all the ways he has redeemed us. We sacrifice some of our time to be here; we sacrifice some of our bounty to acknowledge God. We risk opening our mouths and sharing our hearts. Here, LORD, here I am. I praise you for redeeming me. Let us give thanks to the LORD for he is good. His steadfast love and mercy endure forever. Let the Redeemed of the LORD say so. In worship. In compassion for the weak and wounded, sick and sore. In the humility and gratitude that sends us out into the world to seek and to save the lost.