

Fourth Sunday of Lent

March 18, 2012

Ephesians 2:1-10; **Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22**

How Can We Give Thanks to God In Difficult Times

It's not always easy to give thanks to God.

We don't roll out of bed every day – feeling great, ready to take on the day, breaking forth in song singing, “This is the day the Lord has made”

We find ourselves dragging ourselves through the day; weighed down with whatever burden we are trying to carry.

I remember in the 70s there was a series of books by Merlin Carouthers, *Power in Praise, Walking and Leaping*, which expressed that we need to learn to praise God in everything

– a number of people misinterpreted what he was saying and thought he was advocating praising God **for** everything

– **a view that everything must have a purpose**

– “for everything” rather than “**in** everything.”

When we are in the midst of struggling, pain, the furthest thing from our minds is to give praise to God for what we are experiencing.

Yet, so many argue that there is a purpose for everything – so give praise to God.

This is to misunderstand a passage of Scripture that many refer to in difficult times – Romans 8:28.

Often it is expressed as this: “*And we know that God causes all things to work together for good, of those who love God, who have been called according to God's purpose*”

But that is not what Paul expresses: Listen to the difference: “*And we know that **in all things** God works for the good of those who love God, who have been called according to God's purpose.*”

“**In all things**” God works for good; not “**all things work together for good**”

Not all things are of God, nor do all things have a purpose

– the word of hope is not that everything happens for a reason,

But that in all situations,

in the midst of all we experience,

in the midst of all that stuff that brings us pain,

God is at work to bring about God's purposes.

It is not the situation that God uses, but rather, **God is present in every situation to bring about the purposes of God** – of those who love God, of those who have been called according to God's purpose.”

So everything, whatever happens, does not have a purpose.

Trauma is far from the purposes of God for humanity!

Trauma in our lives is not God's will in our lives, for our lives.

But God promises to be with us in the midst of trauma.

Yesterday afternoon and evening Lynne and I were at close friends mourning the death of a brother through suicide.

The family, the mother who also there, but did not want to talk about her deceased son when I asked about memories of him

– but then, knowing I was a pastor, asked me about suicide, faith, and God – is it wrong?

I responded with Psalm 22, though he felt abandoned by God, he was not – God was with him

– could she remember her son not at his darkest, but for the son that he was.

This is what Psalm 107 shares with us – give thanks to God, because God is with us in whatever we are experiencing

– we are not alone.

In giving voice to Psalm 107, **we are reminded that each one of us has a story to tell**

– and not just great memory stories, rather **we have trauma stories, pain stories.**

Psalm 107 shares four kinds of stories

– each beginning with:

“Some wandered in the desert wastelands” (v 4),

“Some sat in darkness” (v 10),

“Some became fools through their rebellious ways” (v. 17),

“Some went out to sea in ships” – and were caught up in a storm (vv. 23, 25).

I can identify with these “some,” and when I read this Psalm, I can say, “I wandered in the desert wastelands,”

“I sat in darkness,” “I became a fool through my rebellious ways,”

– but, perhaps only metaphorically, have I been out to sea on a ship caught in a storm.

Where do I begin to tell my story in which these words are my opening line?

My last couple of years at Northern Seminary – can be expressed through these words.

Lynne no longer liked who she was married to.

My mood was dark, I was irritable, I felt trapped, I felt distant from God

– I taught in seminary about God, about ministry

– and though, it represented a longing that might be true in my life

– it was a dark time for me as I wrestled with being in a situation that was “sucking the life out of me.”

In this Psalm, these stories are of distress, **my story is one of distress, we all have stories in which we express such distress.**

And so – in the midst of these stories of distress, how can we express what is declared in v. 1: “Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever?”

– that seems so foreign, so far from our reality.

How can we give thanks when we recount these stories of disorientation?

It is all in how we tell our story!

The Psalmist is not expressing a Pollyannaish attitude

- a life with a perpetual smile on one's face
- being out of touch with reality
- rather the opposite is true
- the Psalmist is expressing a reorienting way of living in the brokenness of our realities.

In exploring this passage, the Engaging Scripture Group talked about trauma theory

- and how the distress of trauma (whatever that trauma might be) disrupts our temporal timelines, disrupts normal healing processes, goes beyond the ability to find resolution through the self-help books found in the pop psychology section of Barnes and Noble.

Telling the story of our trauma is important, for sure very difficult, sometimes even impossible.

A few weeks ago, 5 of us went to AMBS for a one-day workshop entitled, *Healing the Spiritual Wounds of War*, and we heard numerous stories of the kind of trauma veterans experience through war

- helping us come to understand that almost all soldiers are victims of the military machine.

We heard story after story of how soldiers affected by PTSD were unable to tell their stories, of how in battle, of how their involvement in killing, deeply affected their brains

- to the extent that the VA is realizing that more than PTSD is going on in the lives of returning vets
- there is a deep moral injury that many vets struggle with as they reflect upon their involvement in violence against another human being.

In PTSD there is not merely a memory of violence – there is a reliving of the violence.

From Vietnam onwards, vets need to be able to tell their stories of the trauma they experienced and participated in

- yet so many are unable to
- resulting in a high-rate of suicide.

To tell stories of trauma are difficult, because they lead us to relive the trauma; they re-temporalize the trauma – making it a present experience once again.

And because we want to forget, we do not want to tell the story of our trauma – whatever that trauma may be, but in not doing so

- **we are giving death reign in our lives.**

The psalmist in Psalm 107, shares with us a different way, a way of life, a different way of telling our stories

- that leads us through the disorientation of reliving the stories we so desperately want to forget.

So, what is so important about learning to tell our stories of trauma.

Because, as is expressed in v 2

- **redemption comes through telling of our stories**

– “Let the redeemed of the LORD tell their story” “those the LORD redeemed from the hand of the foe”

So how does retelling the story of our trauma set us free?

It would seem that commonsense would say, reliving the trauma keeps us in despair, rather than bringing healing.

It is in how we engage our stories, and how we engage God in the midst of our story – that we are set free

We see a pattern emerging in each of the stories of trauma presented in Psalm 107.

I already mentioned the repeated pattern found in vv. 4, 10, 17 – “Some wandered in desert wastelands, some sat in darkness, some became fools through their rebellious ways,” but there is also another pattern:

VV. 8, 15, 21, 31

– “Let them give thanks to the LORD for God’s unfailing love and God’s wonderful deeds for humankind.”

It follows another pattern found in vv. 6, 13, 19, 28

– “Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and God delivered them from their distress”

And we discover a pattern of healing taking place in vv. 7, 14, 20, 29

– “God led them by a straight way, God brought them out of darkness, God sent out the Word of God and healed them, God stilled the storm to a whisper.”

What is going on in these patterns?

It is the learning to tell our stories in a different way;

it is learning to tell a new story;

and as we tell it within community

We begin to hear them as new stories.

When we tell stories of our trauma, we often share it as a narrative that binds us, disempowers us, breaks us, and ultimately leads to death.

In bringing God into the midst of the darkness of our trauma narratives, into the midst of our disorienting stories of what happened to us, by bringing in God, even learning to thank God in our situations – we connect ourselves to God.

We begin to tell our story in a new way.

A story begins to be retold as a **redemptive narrative that unbinds us**, heals us, empowers us, flooding our lives with life.

And we are to tell these stories in community

– because we may not be able by ourselves to share this story as a redemptive narrative

– we need others who hear our story, to retell our own stories in ways that healing can take place in our lives

– by reminding us we are not abandoned by God, we are not alone,

We are with each other;

God is with us,

God is at work in the painful situations of our lives to bring about healing, wholeness, life.

That is the power of support that we receive from one another.

We, because we are like everyone else, do not have power in ourselves to heal ourselves
– but as we tell our story of addiction, of trauma, others begin to walk with us
– and in walking and sharing together we find healing and wholeness, turning our stories in stories of redemption

We come to believe that we can tell our story differently – **a story within a narrative of redemption.**

Psalm 107 encourages us that our stories of trauma can become redemptive stories

– especially as we learn to tell them in the context of the community.

Linda shares about the time, Old Order Mennonites stayed at her home; The man who suffered a heart attack was recuperating from by-pass surgery, so distant from their home and community in Missouri.

He did not have strength to tell his story

– but others from his community who came to be with him helped him tell his story in such a way that it became not only a story of healing and redemption in his telling, but also in his mind, in his life.

As we as a community, struggle with telling our stories,

Let us help each other tell our stories, and even to introduce the presence of God into our stories

– so that we begin sharing our stories and our lives through a redemptive, healing, setting free narrative
– not only in the telling, but also being transformed by seeing the active presence of God in the midst of our stories.

And to get into the habit of telling our stories of pain, we need to learn how to share all kinds of stories with one another.

This happens when we open our lives to be with one another

– **because stories cannot be told and shared unless we are present to one another**

– visiting with one another, being with each other in our homes (asking the significance of a particular picture, award, furniture, etc – as a basis for unfolding our stories with one another).

In developing the practice of community in sharing our stories with one another

– we need to be with one another outside of our Sunday gathering.

In learning to tell our “happy stories,” our “memory stories,” “our life stories,” we will develop trust in one another to tell our “trauma stories” to which the Psalmist invites us.

And as we learn to tell our stories in this way – in the pattern of Psalm 107, we will find ourselves telling the rest of the story

– “offering sacrifices of thank offerings to God and telling of God’s works with songs of joy” (v. 22).

We may not often think of communion in such a way,

but **Communion is telling the story of God’s brokenness, our brokenness,**

of God identifying with our brokenness in Jesus, and Jesus’ embracing us and our stories

- not for a retelling of a narrative of death, but as a telling of a narrative of redemption,
 - And so we break forth into Eucharist
 - We break forth into thanksgiving

This is what “Communion” means: sharing in this story of God’s redemption together as a community.

Communion is a dramatic acting out that our story is deeply connected with God’s Story – here, right here, in our lives.

We are embraced by God’s Story which embraces each one of us and radically changes us.

Let us give thanks to God in the midst of all that we experience in our lives, so that we live through the trauma of the cross – to indwell the victory of the Resurrection.