

God's Steadfast Love

Cycle #2 - Session #1

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Text: Psalm 33

Gathering

Opening Worship

Light a candle as you begin this second cycle. You may want to have everyone bring their candle, or at least the candle holder, and light all of the candles or light one candle at the beginning and then light all of them as part of the closing worship and the renewal of covenant.

Song: *The Gift of Love -- #526 Chalice Hymnal*

Litany

O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens.

**Out of the mouths of babes and infants
you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,
to silence the enemy and the avenger.**

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
**what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals* that you care for them?**

Yet you have made them a little lower than God,*
and crowned them with glory and honor.

**You have given them dominion over the works of your
hands; you have put all things under their feet,
all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field,
the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.**

**O LORD, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!**

Welcome One Another. Spend a few minutes in conversation about what you have learned and experienced so far. What new insights may you have discovered since you were last together? If there are new people, invite them to talk about what it is they hope to find as they join your journey.

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Scripture

Psalm 33

- ¹Rejoice in the LORD, O you righteous.
Praise befits the upright.
- ²Praise the LORD with the lyre;
make melody to him with the harp of ten strings.
- ³Sing to him a new song;
play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts.
- ⁴For the word of the LORD is upright,
and all his work is done in faithfulness.
- ⁵He loves righteousness and justice;
the earth is full of the steadfast love of the LORD.
- ⁶By the word of the LORD the heavens were made,
and all their host by the breath of his mouth.
- ⁷He gathered the waters of the sea as in a bottle;
he put the deeps in storehouses.
- ⁸Let all the earth fear the LORD;
let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him.
- ⁹For he spoke, and it came to be;
he commanded, and it stood firm.
- ¹⁰The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing;
he frustrates the plans of the peoples.
- ¹¹The counsel of the LORD stands for ever,
the thoughts of his heart to all generations.
- ¹²Happy is the nation whose God is the LORD,
the people whom he has chosen as his heritage.
- ¹³The LORD looks down from heaven;
he sees all humankind.
- ¹⁴From where he sits enthroned he watches
all the inhabitants of the earth—
- ¹⁵he who fashions the hearts of them all,
and observes all their deeds.
- ¹⁶A king is not saved by his great army;
a warrior is not delivered by his great strength.
- ¹⁷The war horse is a vain hope for victory,
and by its great might it cannot save.
- ¹⁸Truly the eye of the LORD is on those who fear him,
on those who hope in his steadfast love,

¹⁹to deliver their soul from death,
and to keep them alive in famine.

²⁰Our soul waits for the LORD;
he is our help and shield.

²¹Our heart is glad in him,
because we trust in his holy name.

²²Let your steadfast love, O LORD, be upon us,
even as we hope in you.

Dwelling in Scripture

1st reading - Allow people time to reflect on what they have heard. Note the word or phrase which drew your attention this time.

2nd reading - Invite people to talk about what they have heard and where it might intersect with their lives.

Behind the Text

Where to begin? First, a little about the book of Psalms:

- 1) Like most hymnals, it is a compilation of many songs collected over a long period of years.
- 2) It contains a wide range of materials. There are psalms of praise, psalms of lament, and psalms with both of those qualities. There are prayers of thanksgiving and supplication. The poetry of the psalms is often lost in translation. The King James Version was less accurate, but the poetry is easier to hear. Occasionally there are psalms that reflect a desire for revenge or pleasure at the downfall of an enemy, as well as unedited raw feelings. The psalms are often the expression of very human longings, desires, hopes, and understanding. They are not always in the language my mother would have chosen... *"If you can't say something nice, don't say anything."* If you want a short history of the journey of God's people from the beginning of the universe to the present, there are several psalms that carry the condensed version of all that history.
- 3) The psalms often lift up an understanding of the nature of God and proclaim God to be a God of justice who calls us to seek justice, a righteous God who is to be served by people of righteousness. God's desire for the nations to live in peace is certainly one call that resonates in our own time and place. The psalms sometimes call us to look up from the trivia of daily life and behold the wonder of God's creative power in the world.

If you were going on a long trip and were told you could bring one or maybe two books of scripture with you, what would you choose? Through the centuries at least one of the books people have chosen in those circumstances has been the book of Psalms. Its handy size makes it a good traveling companion and when necessary it has been more easily concealed than most books can be. That little book, among other things, has made long ocean voyages, been to prison, provided teaching materials for children who had none, and comforted people in all kinds of places and circumstances. Christians have often seen in the psalms a foreshadowing of Jesus and understood Jesus at least in part through the Psalms. Even Jesus on the cross is thought to refer to Psalm 22, *"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* Through the centuries many have memorized all or parts of Psalms and in difficult times or times of great joy those are recited. The Psalms have been sung as chant, and set to hymn tunes, been the basis

of great oratorios, formed the text of cantatas and been the inspiration of great concertos and symphonies.

I grew up in church. The church to which my family belonged stressed the importance of knowing scripture. I was told over and over how important the Psalms were. As a nine year old with my first Bible I began a valiant attempt to read the Psalms. Of course, the effort wasn't very successful. There was too much I didn't have the resources to comprehend. But in that first attempt I was fascinated by the word *Selah*. I thought such a mysterious word used so often must have a great deal of meaning. Years later I learned it is apparently some kind of musical instruction, but I've never found the exact meaning of it. Like many things its importance and exact meaning have been lost. The continued importance of the psalms rests not on what we don't understand, but on what we can grasp. It has been a book for all times and all people.

Perhaps the Psalms should come with a book of instructions. Some of them are easy enough to understand and value. Clearly one of the great favorites is the 23rd Psalm. There must be hundreds of musical settings for those words and it has often comforted people in hard times and difficult places. For people who have known it all of their lives even in the face of death it offers comfort and reassurance and seems to soothe long after people no longer appear to have awareness of things around them.

My own appreciation of the Psalms began to grow while my husband and I were in seminary and working for a small inner city Presbyterian Church in South Indianapolis. The Presbyterians had the practice of including a Psalm in all of their worship services. Over the years since, I have continued that practice and as with much poetry, familiarity deepens my appreciation both of the words and those who wrote them. Several years ago when I began to learn about the Benedictines, I discovered they not only read or recite several Psalms during each time of prayer, they cover the whole book each week, day after day, year after year until the words are written on their hearts.

The Psalms are not always easy reading. In our time they are often seen as prayers of the individual. In their own time many were songs of the community. Often we do not have the connections that would make them readily available to us. Many of them were used in the temple. Seventy three of them (*NIB, IV. P. 643*) are ascribed to David. However, it is not at all certain how many of them he may have written or even when they were written. If you want to learn more about the critical studies of the Psalms, there are dozens of good books available. In this session, however, we are going to focus on only Psalm 33 and most of the information, unless otherwise indicated, comes from the New Interpreter's Bible, Volume IV.

Psalms is divided into five books, each with a distinctive point of view. (*The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. IV, provides an excellent outline of the five on pp. 678-681.*) The Psalms in Book 1 (1-41) cover the gamut of human experience, sometimes reach for the heavens and sometimes grow from despair. Overall they point to the nature of God and the relationship of God and people. God is lifted up by those who live faithful, righteous, just lives and in return, God will be God, creator of the universe, and also the one who cares for the earth and its inhabitants. Psalm 33 calls the righteous to rejoice in God, to offer their praises with voice and instruments, to see God in the creation which God

called into being and to understand “the earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord” (NIB, 809)

Consider

Before moving on to a study of this particular Psalm, you may want to take a few moments and reflect on your own experience with the Psalms. How many Psalms do you know? Which ones have you carried with you? How often do you turn to Psalms? What, if anything, in them seems to touch your heart? Have you ever been in the place you wanted revenge on your enemies or wished God would “smite” a few? What about some of the other sentiments expressed?

Begin your study of this Psalm by reading through the 22 verses several times. If possible, read it out loud. Listen to its words. Notice the key words or phrases. While scholars may tell you many things about this and other Psalms, listen with the ears and eyes of your heart and then if you want, go to the scholars. They may enrich your understanding and appreciation of the Psalms.

Observation

It may be helpful to begin your look at this psalm by reading the one before it. Like many things, Psalm 33 doesn't stand by itself and appears to be carefully linked to Psalm 32. Psalm 32 offers a prescription for the happiness which comes from confession and forgiveness of sin. Psalm 32 helps us grasp that being “upright” or righteousness doesn't depend on our being sinless. As humans we will sin. Penitence is the appropriate response and God is gracious and forgiving. The last verse of 32 says, “*Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, O Righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.*” Psalm 33 begins with a response to those words. In the space of 4 short sentences we are told to *Rejoice in God, offer praise* out of who we are, and *do it with music* both played and sung.

Consider

What has been your own experience of seeking forgiveness? When you sought someone's forgiveness was it given freely or did it come with strings? How do you experience God's forgiveness? Does God forgive more readily than you do? How do you want to respond? How might this speak to you or to your congregation in the process of transformation?

Observation

The intent of Psalm 33 appears to be the recognition of the comprehensive nature of God's sovereignty over all that is, has been or will be. Even its length, 22 lines, is the same length as the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet. The completeness of the Psalm appears to be intended to help us comprehend the completeness of God. Psalm 32 and 33 read together point to the wonder of a God so powerful, the world, and even the unfolding of history, is held in God's power and at the same time God offers an amazing grace in forgiving sinners. Psalm 33 also points to the futility of humans

believing they can control what happens or that even the most powerful nations and rulers can determine and control events.

Consider

Describing God is an impossible task. It is said that one of the reasons the camel smiles is that there are a hundred names for God, and humans know only ninety nine. At the beginning of creation, God whispered the 100th name to the camel and the camel has kept the secret ever since. Spend some time considering how you might express your understanding of God. What in this psalm seems to be true to your own experience? Where do you find yourself questioning?

Observation

The command to offer praise to God which appears at the beginning of this psalm appears repeatedly throughout the Psalms and as well as other texts. It appears to carry a deeper meaning than words or tunes coming out of ones mouth. It is really about offering oneself to God. If you're fortunate enough to have musical gifts those are to be offered. However, the means of the offering isn't nearly as important as the action. To offer ones self seems an appropriate response from those who begin by acknowledging their dependence on God.

Consider

If offering ones self to God is a beginning of response to an awareness of our dependence upon God, how do you offer yourself? When you think of dependence upon God, what comes to your mind? There are those who would say if we are truly dependent upon God then we can leave everything to God and get on with whatever we're doing. God will take care of it. That, however, for many of us doesn't seem to fit. So what for you is the balance between the finiteness of your life and the infiniteness of God? What does this say about church and transformation?

Observation

Elizabeth Barrett Browning in her famous sonnet wrote a love poem to her husband which begins, "*How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.*" The psalmist has done something quite similar. He begins by inviting us to praise God, to offer ourselves and then moves on to all the reasons God is worthy of that praise. The two words, *word* and *work* appear to be closely connected. God speaks and God's work is made visible. Following the word which brings all that is into being, the psalmist brings in another concept, *God's will*. Those who think themselves to be the greatest and most powerful have in reality only limited power which in the end leads to nothing.

Consider

If you were to consider your reasons for loving God what would you give? What do you think might be God's reasons for loving us, for loving the creation? A hundred years

from now what will you have done in response to God's love which will affect those who follow you?

Activity (Optional)

As a group write a praise psalm, perhaps using Psalm 33 as a guide.

Practicing the Presence

Scripture Psalm 33

- 1) If at all possible, begin your prayer practice for this session and each session, the week before the group gathers so that when you meet with the other group members, you will have already had an opportunity to focus on the scripture for that session not only by having read the study material, but also with having used the scripture as the focus of your prayer time. This week use the Psalm as a focusing prayer. Each morning begin with these words. Spend a few moments reflecting on how this might be lived in your life today. At the end of the day take a few moments and reflect on how you may have offered gifts of praise and thanksgiving through your day. If you like to journal, you may wish to spend a few minutes writing.
- 2) Daily reflection on the text for the next session, Psalms 137-38

Suggested Reading Pattern

- 1st Read and listen to the text. Notice phrases that seem familiar or stand out for you. You may want to read it out loud or you may want to read it with someone else.
- 2nd Choose a word or phrase to carry with you and reflect on it as it comes to your mind through the day. (If you read at night – let the word or phrase rest overnight and pick it up in the morning. Remember the pattern of creation – “evening and morning.” You may receive fresh insights when you waken.)
- 3rd During the week read “Behind the Text” and the “Observations/Consider” on the text. Even a few minutes spent each day or several times a week, will enrich your experience of the study and the experience of your small group.

Closing Worship

Renew your covenant of commitment to one another

This might be formal or informal. If you already have a covenant, look at it together and add to it if you choose. Make the covenant something you can all commit to and not something that becomes so burdensome you will simply set it aside.

Words to carry with you -

Write yourself a message to carry with you this week. It may be a phrase from the scripture or something you've heard. It may be a word of encouragement or a reminder of the gifts God has given you, whatever will be helpful for you to remember.

Blessing

Blest be all creation and all that has life
Blest be the earth
May your presence uplift us day and night
Blest be the fire
May its warmth and brightness glow in us
Blest be the water
May it refresh us when we thirst
As you refresh the earth with rain
Blest be the air that it remind us
You are always as near as the air we breath.
As you bless us may we bless one another and all we meet.
Amen

Celtic prayer adapted

Song: Lo, I Am With You -- #430 Chalice Hymnal