

Good News Translation

- ³Your constant love is better than life itself,
and so I will praise you.
⁴I will give you thanks as long as I live;
I will raise my hands to you in prayer.
⁵My soul will feast and be satisfied,
and I will sing glad songs of praise to you.

Proclamation of the Word

Carlisle Moore- Grew up in the same church, just that he was 50 years before me. I met Carlisle in his late years, struggling with health issues and age. He was an elder on our church session in Rock Hill. Carlisle lived a good, long life. He attended Davidson College and was known to break out into the fight song at any moment. After the war he graduated from the Wharton School of Business. He was a solid citizen, a CPA, who built a business, a secure home for his family, and served and loved his church. He was a giver, not a taker. He taught bible class, was an officer, and contributed money sacrificially. He was a joy. You would always leave a visit with Carlisle and feel glad you met him.

But at the end of his life, I learned that Carlisle had endured trouble before. He told me about serving in WWII. He showed me the tattered prayer booklet that he carried everyday in his uniform breast pocket. His church, our church, had sent it to him.

But the most impressive thing I learned about Carlisle is that every night before bed, he would kneel by his bedside and pray. He would wake up in the morning and pray, kneeling by his bed to start his day. His mother taught him to do this as a child, and he never quit praying on his knees.

He knew that God's promises were sure,
that he could rely on God's presence to guide him.
that he could call on the Lord in the day of trouble.

Carlisle knew that the steadfast love of the Lord was better than life itself. Maybe you know someone that reminds you of Carlisle.

David

David was in trouble.
Heart bowed and knees bent.
He was thirsty for God. Empty. Parched.
He is crying out to God while being pursued perhaps by his own son, Absalom.
He calls upon the Lord, trusting God's promise to be his help and strength.
I imagine David prayed on his knees.

David knew that the steadfast love of the Lord was better than life.

Ordination

Raise your hand if you have been ordained in the Presbyterian church?

Raise your hand if you have been a part of an ordination service?

This week I attended a workshop by Steve Eason on officer training. His father was a Methodist minister. Steve was planning to do the same. He attended Duke, was ordained Methodist, but became Presbyterian.

The reason he became Presbyterian is because of this (get down on knees). We ask folks, not just clergy, to get on their knees and make promises. And those promises are to serve and care for the church asking for God's help. Listen...

Ordination Prayer

All gracious God: you have chosen me./ Now give me strength and wisdom,/ love and compassion,/ faith and hope,/ to do the work for our Lord Jesus Christ./ Amen.

We believe God's promises are true and that God's presence is our help in times of trouble.

We submit to one another and to God because we know that God's steadfast love is better than life.

And we begin our service on our knees.

Carlisle knew trouble.

David was in trouble in the desert wilderness.

Officers of the church are ordained into lifelong ministry through joys and troubles. All of us know troubles. The way through that desert is by relying on God. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled."

As Fred Craddock used to say, you can get to Easter, get to Jerusalem, without going through the desert, but if you do, when you arrive you won't find Jesus and you won't be able to live in the power of the resurrection.

Because when we get down on our knees, hearts bowed, head bent, our petitions turn to praise. The power of Jesus through the Holy Spirit that will cause us to lift our heads, raise our hands, and bring us into the Presence of the Joy of the Lord.

Friends in Christ, God's steadfast love is better than life!

Laura Smith Conrad

Fort Hill Presbyterian Church

3rd Sunday of Lent

February 28, 2016

The Psalms are the songbook of the Bible and so this morning we will learn a response in the Taize' tradition of contemplative prayer by singing. The response is printed in your bulletin to sing after hearing the written Word read.

First, we will listen to the music, then to our PSA voices will sing the response and finally the congregation will join in singing the second time.

After the first and second meditations the congregation is invited to sing the response once. Then after the final meditation, let us sing it as a contemplative prayer repeating multiple times.

Our text today comes from Psalm 63 which is one of the individual lament psalms and credited to David when he was in the Judean wilderness, perhaps during the time he was fleeing from King Saul.

Listen for the Word of the Lord.

Psalm 63:1-8 ^{NRS} **Psalm 63:1** <A Psalm of David, when he was in the Wilderness of Judah.>

O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. ² So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory.

³ Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you. ⁴ So I will bless you as long as I live; I will lift up my hands and call on your name.

⁵ My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips ⁶ when I think of you on my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night; ⁷ for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy. ⁸ My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.

In the Lord, I'll Be Ever Thankful (654)

Meditation # 1

O God! It is me.

I am here again, weary from the darkness that surrounds the one I love, that now surrounds me too. Even though it has only been a day, the night feels like it reaches into eternity and I cannot seem to find you.

Where are you God?

I hear words, barely making sense of what they mean. How much time is left? Or is it how little time is left? I sit in silence . . . empty . . . alone . . . afraid . . . What I think is a glimmer of hope actually thrusts me deeper into despair. I am lost in the wilderness, hearing sounds I do not recognize, seeing nightmares during the day. My soul is tormented by this all too familiar place, where doubt and fear are partners of my undoing. Why am I so afraid if I think I know you, God?

I am weary, God. . . . Where are you?

In my anguish I forget to drink water and my body is dehydrated. My tears are only salt, causing my eyes to shut in crusted pain. My heart cries when my eyes cannot. Maybe, just maybe, the darkness is where I will dwell. If my heart continues to cry, then will it too be crystalized like a rock? Break me from this captivity that binds me without chains, but withers my spirit.

I am spent God. . . . Why do you not hear me?

If I lay down to rest, I fear being devoured by the night, not the sweet peace that comes from you, but the emptiness that draws me further from your presence. I want to rest in your arms, but I feel like I am falling, falling, deep into the pit.

Are you there, God? . . . I need you. . . . Help me.

I thirst for the day of my baptism when I was in the care of your congregation, sheltered by your wings. But I am alone and broken in spirit. I am too weak to follow you. In fact, I do not even know where you are, so following you is impossible right now.

God, please give me a sign that you hear me . . . that you are near me.

My mouth is too parched to praise you and my lips are chapped and peeling. Life escapes me. Give me a drink, O God. I am thirsty. O, that I could taste you in the sanctuary, at your table of goodness and mercy. My soul is dry, my devotion is weak. Even my Bible is dusty and my heart is cracked open from the numb pain of not being in your presence. This is no life. Not even for those who speak against me, not even for my enemies.

Why, O God, am I withering on your vine? Will you not help me, God?

Please say something, God.

How can I live without you?

Will I live?

God! O God, hear me, I pray!

Psalm 63: Meditation # 3
Kelly Roman
Fort Hill Presbyterian Church
February 28, 2016

In the *Message* paraphrase of the final verses of our Psalm, we hear these words:

“Because you’ve always stood up for me,
I’m free to run and play.
I hold on to you for dear life,
and you hold me steady as a post” (Psalm 63:7-8).

At the NEXT Conference, I went to a workshop on vulnerability in ministry. It was led by Pastors Roy Howard and Shelby Etheridge Harasty. We began by remembering that God is a vulnerable God: God came to the world as a helpless infant in a humble stable. We may sing “no crying he makes” at Christmas, when we sing “Away in a Manger,” but in becoming a human baby, Jesus probably cried like any other infant. In his adult life, he faced temptation in the wilderness. He experienced the spectrum of human emotions. He wept when his friend Lazarus died. And on the cross, God in Jesus Christ suffered death for the sake of the world.

The workshop drew from the work of Brene Brown, who writes and speaks on the vulnerability of human beings. You may be familiar with her books or TED Talks. Brown defines vulnerability as “uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure.” She acknowledges that it’s hard work. It involves discomfort. But, as Brown writes, it’s also “the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity.”¹ So, sharing our true selves with people we trust is worth the risk.

Until this workshop, I hadn’t given much thought to the connection between our vulnerability as humans and our relationship with God.

In creating us, God has given us the capacity to be vulnerable – both with God and other people. With God, this can happen in prayer. Some of my deepest times of prayer are when I’m alone in my car on a road trip, talking out loud to God.

In our human relationships, God has given us the capacity:

- To admit when we are struggling and need help
- To serve our neighbors, taking time to hear their stories and share our own
- To bravely try new ways of being the church, even when we can't predict how our ideas will play out
- To lift our voices in the face of injustice

“Because you’ve always stood up for me,
I’m free to run and play.

I hold on to you for dear life,
and you hold me steady as a post” (Psalm 63:7-8).

Even in our most terrifying moments, God holds us. We are free to run and play instead of being held captive by fear. We are free to enjoy gifts of “love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, and creativity.”ⁱⁱ

During the closing sermon at the NEXT Conference, Pastor Denise Anderson asked us the question, “Do you really think that your mistakes have the final word?” She preached, “God is bigger than our mistakes.”

The fear of making mistakes can keep us from fully enjoying being in the presence of God and the people we love. It can keep us from fully embracing the future to which God invites us.

One of my favorite poems is by Mary Oliver and it’s called “I Worried.” There is a shift in the poem from fear to freedom:

I worried a lot. Will the garden grow, will the rivers
flow in the right direction, will the earth turn
as it was taught, and if not how shall
I correct it?

Was I right, was I wrong, will I be forgiven,
can I do better?

Will I ever be able to sing, even the sparrows
can do it and I am, well,
hopeless.

Is my eyesight fading or am I just imagining it,
am I going to get rheumatism,
lockjaw, dementia?

Finally I saw that worrying had come to nothing.
And gave it up. And took my old body
and went out into the morning,
and sang.ⁱⁱⁱ

Today we have been singing good news: “Do not be afraid. Lift up your voices,
the Lord is near.”^{iv}

This is good news for you, and me, for the church, and for the world. May we
savor it and share it.

ⁱ Brene Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead*

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Mary Oliver, “I Worried,” *Swan: Poems and Prose Poems*

^{iv} *Glory to God* Hymn #654 “In the Lord I’ll Be Ever Thankful”