5-17-20, The Holy Way

Sermon on Psalm 66:8—20

1. Introduction
2. A psalm of thanksgiving
3. The expression of thanksgiving evolves from encompassing the entire world to that of a single individual
4. Prayer
5. The text
6. (v. 8 & 9) **A call to bless God** Bless our God, O peoples, let the sound of his praise be heard, who has kept us among the living, and has not let our feet slip [In Psalm 21 we also have this statement that God will not let our feet slip, but here it seems to mean that God will not let us slip into spiritual death.].
7. (v. 10—12) **Ways in which we have been tested**
8. (v. 10b) You have tried us as silver is tried [or purified]
9. (v. 11a) You brought us into the net [Imagine a fish in a fishing net]
10. (v. 11b) You laid burdens on our backs
11. (v. 12a) You let people ride over our heads
12. (v. 12b) We went through fire and water [We have experienced the extremes]
13. (v. 12c) Yet you have brought us out to a spacious place
14. (V. 13—15) The Psalmist’s commitment
15. (v. 13 & 14) I will come into your house with burnt offerings [This is not the kind of offering where certain parts of the animal are burned and the rest is given back to the one making the offering for his own use. In the burnt offering, the animal is completely consumed by fire. This represents total commitment and devotion on the part of the believer.] I will pay my vows, those that my lips uttered and my mouth promised when I was in trouble.
16. (v. 15) I will offer to you burnt offerings of fatlings, with the smoke of the sacrifice of rams; I will make an offering of bulls and goats. Selah [an instruction for worship, with the precise meaning not clear]
17. (v. 16—20) **The testimony of the Psalmist** Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will tell you what he has done for me.
18. (v. 17) I cried aloud to him, and he was extolled with my tongue [this is another couplet, for emphasis]
19. (v. 18) If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.
20. (v. 19) But truly God has listened; he has given heed to the words of my prayer.
21. (v. 20) Blessed be God, because he has not rejected my prayer or removed his steadfast love [*hesed*] from me
22. So, what?

The Psalmist calls upon us to bless God. That’s a kind of an odd concept in itself, isn’t it? But when we praise God and glorify God, that is an act of blessing. It is a huge part of our call as followers of Jesus to worship and glorify God. We do that gathered together when we can. But when we can’t, like now, we still gather in community, even if we’re in our own homes. And each of us, as we worship, is blessing God with our praise. And why do we do this? Because, as the Psalmist says, God has “kept us among the living.” We will not live in this physical body forever, but, through the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, we have spiritual life that is abundant and eternal. We are now and always will be among the living.

The Psalmist says that we have been tested. There are a couple of ways we can understand that idea. And I find one more consistent with the God of the Bible than another. One understanding is that God sits in heaven and says, “Hmmmm. I think I’ll give Joe leukemia and see how he handles it. And I’ll give Sue a traffic accident and see if she passes the test. And, while I’m at it, I’ll give a whole bunch of people a virus nobody’s ever seen before.” My friends, that doesn’t fit my understanding of the God we see described in the Scriptures, with the possible exception of the story of Job. Rather, I understand God to be present with us, strengthening us and purifying our faith as we encounter the various troubles and tragedies that come with a broken and sinful world.

The Psalmist says that we are to be all-in in our commitment to God. So, what does that mean? It means that we must walk the journey with integrity, compassion, and love. It means that to reflect that love to every traveler we meet along the way. The difficulty is that word “every.” For each one of us, there are people who are easy to love and people who are difficult to love. For some, it’s those liberals. For others, it’s those conservatives or those evangelicals. For some, it’s those millennials. For some it’s those boomers.

All of those people, all those others, are created in the image of God Almighty. If any are to be dismissed or disregarded, if any are to be treated with contempt, we need to leave that to God. We do not have standing to look down on anyone. Our role, our job, our devotion to God is to love those we encounter. That’s it.

Finally, the Psalmist invites us to follow in the way of telling of God’s greatness. Some of us have stories of restored relationship with God after our own willful stubbornness distanced us from God. Others of us have stories of having known and cherished God’s love from the first earliest of our memories. Still others of us are still on the road of discovering what our relationship with God is. The common denominator is that God is with us on our journey. And that’s a story worth telling.

When it’s safe for all of us, including the most vulnerable among us, to gather in worship, we’ll praise and glorify God together. Until then, we’ll glorify God in our individual services of worship and in the way we walk the road, knowing that God will walk it with us, every step of the way. May we go along rejoicing. May it be so. Amen