



CANCER AWARENESS DAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, May 3, 2009

Janet Floyd, Guest Lectionary Commentator

Senior Pastor of New Beginnings Worship Center, Monroe, LA

Lection - Psalm 103 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 1) Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless His holy name. (v. 2) Bless the Lord, O my soul and do not forget all His benefits (v. 3) who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, (v. 4) who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, (v. 5) who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. (v. 6) The Lord works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed. (v. 7) He made known His ways to Moses, His acts to the people of Israel. (v. 8) The Lord is merciful and gracious; slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. (v. 9) He will not always accuse, nor will He keep His anger forever. (v. 10) He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. (v. 11) For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His steadfast love toward those who fear Him; (v. 12) as far as the east is from the west, so far He removes our transgressions from us. (v. 13) As a father has compassion for His children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear Him. (v. 14) For he knows how we were made; He remembers that we are dust. (v. 15) As for mortals, their days are like grass; (v. 16) for

the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more. (v. 17) But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear Him, and His righteousness to children's children, (v. 18) those who keep His covenant and remember to do His commandments. (v. 19) The Lord has established His throne in the heavens and His kingdom rules over all. (v. 20) bless the Lord, O you His angels, you mighty ones who do His bidding, obedient to His spoken word. (v. 21) Bless the Lord, all His hosts, His ministers that do His will. (v. 22) Bless the Lord, all His works, in all places of His dominion. Bless the Lord, O my soul.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Cancer Awareness Day was created to raise awareness in the African American community concerning the rapid spread of cancer and cancer-related diseases among African Americans. "Current statistics suggest that African Americans have the highest mortality rate of any racial and ethnic group for all cancers combined and for most major cancers."¹

Preachers utilize this day to inform their congregants about cancer prevention and early detection, to involve them in the various programs designed to disseminate this information, and to inspire individuals presently living with this disease to continue to live fulfilled and faith-filled lives.

Finally, this day initiates within the context of worship an opportunity for congregants to memorialize those loved ones who have died of cancer, and invites them to release the anguish we experience when God does not choose to heal in the traditional sense.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Psalm 103

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

As long as I could remember, cancer was a tragedy that always "happened" to other people. As an African American girl growing up in middle-class America, I had heard about cancer. To me, it was just another white peoples' disease. However, in 1986 my father, my three siblings, and I met the adversary called cancer, and learned that cancer was not just a white peoples' disease. That year, my mother was diagnosed with stage three breast cancer. As children we could have surrendered to the fear of becoming "motherless" children. Instead, my family was encouraged to have hope by our faith in scripture. Through crying and chemotherapy, we learned to bless and believe in the God "that heals all our dis-eases." We learned as we watched our white neighbor battle brain cancer. We learned as we tasted the "bitterness" of her death, and the "sweetness" of our mother's life. We never learned however, who and when God decides to heal of that dreaded disease. Rather, we grew to be thankful for the lesson of learning to "bless" God despite it all.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Psalm 103, a "song of thanksgiving," serves as the scriptural context used to discuss Cancer Awareness Day. David begins this Psalm speaking to himself, encouraging his own soul to "Bless the Lord Oh My soul and all that is within me, bless His holy name!" (v. 1) For most, the mere suggestion that one can render thanks while battling cancer raises countless queries.

Can we hope to *talk* ourselves into an attitude of thanks, while we seemingly *walk* through cancer's "valley of the shadow of death?" How does one live in the "light" of Psalm 103 while experiencing the "dark night" of the soul?

David uses this Psalm to empower the believer battling cancer to "bless the Lord" by using various names for God to remind us who God is.

Jehovah-Tsidkenu, "the God of our righteousness" ("*tsidek*" - to make straight, declare innocent), is the God depicted in verse three. Here, David offers healing for the body by first providing healing for the soul. "He forgives all our iniquities," David proclaims! Yet not only does He "restore" our souls, as David suggests, but in the latter half of verse three He is Jehovah-Rophe, "The God that heals us;" he healeth all of our disease! (v. 3)

The question of healing is a profound one for those with cancer. Is the psalmist's proclamation to be interpreted literally or figuratively? What is healing for the terminally ill? In verse four we see Jehovah-Nissi, "the Lord our Banner," He who "wars" on our behalf and "redeems" our life "back from destruction." Is healing the "redeeming of our life from 'the' destruction" of the disease itself, a type of remission; is it the "crowning of our heads with 'the' loving-kindness" of long life, and total recovery; or, is it the "tender mercy" of death that brings healing to the cancer patient? (v. 4)

When it seems that the final banner waving is more a solemn surrender rather than a sweet victory, how do we remember that his banner over us is love? When recovery does not come in the traditional sense, how do we admonish our soul to "bless the Lord?"

Because the idea of recovery is so subjective for the cancer patient, the idea of renewal is even more suspect. Jehovah-Rophi, the "Lord our shepherd," is portrayed in verse five. It is the shepherd that "feeds the sheep or "who satisfies my mouth with good things" so that my "youth is renewed like the eagle's." While seemingly "sipping life's bitter dregs," what "good thing" can the cancer patient possibly "hope" to taste?

Or does the "hope" of the terminally ill lie in the eagle's renewal? Likened unto the "spirit," the eagle flies into the "eye of the storm," shedding her old feathers and receiving new ones. Does the "Spirit" bring renewal for the cancer patient through the storm or at its end? Is it the "shedding" of the disease that brings renewal, or is it the "shedding" of life? (v. 5)

The theme of "remembering" who God is and "forgetting not all of His benefits" is reiterated through the entirety of Psalm 103. From God's "unfailing love demonstrated to Moses and the children of Israel," (vv. 6-7) to God's "amazing grace" that flows to all of His children, this Psalm constantly reminds us of El-Shaddai, "the all sufficient, multi-breasted, mother/father God." God is abounding in mercy and compassion, especially to those who are in crisis. (vv. 8-13)

But, most importantly, God is the God that remembers, "...that we are dust." (vv. 14-16) Here lies the hope and healing for the cancer patient and every soul "wrestling" with the dis-eases of

life: remembering that we serve a God that never forgets! Because God knows our days are “fleeting,” His ever-present compassion and everlasting love flows unfettered into the life of his children as a “balm in Gilead,” restoring, redeeming, and renewing in ways that amaze the human life and cause the once wounded soul to erupt in “total praise!” (vv. 17-18)

Consequently, we are able to “drink deep from the wells of His eternal love in the worst of times until our souls cry out. ‘He satisfies my mouth with good things!’” Despite how or when this “healing” manifests, we remain fully persuaded that “any way He blesses us, we will be satisfied!”

This powerful Psalm ends as it begins, challenging the soul to “bless the Lord!” (vv. 19-22)

Celebration

Praise is the weapon, the “healing salve,” we used to heal the “dis-eases” of our lives. Be it “dis-ease” of mind, body, or soul, praise provides the strength for the believer under attack to rise over the enemy victoriously! There is no “ailment” that our God cannot heal! Our Lord is the God that restores, redeems, revives, and renews! Thus, my soul cries out, “Bless the Lord!”

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sounds: (v. 1) As Psalm 103 would have been sung -- imagine the tone and tenor that would have given depending on the circumstance that urged the psalmist to command his soul to “bless the Lord.” If it was a moment of gratefulness that influenced such lyrics, perhaps a fast tempo, a higher pitch, an instrumental accompaniment. Or, if it was in sorrow that this Psalm was crafted, maybe the vocals deepened, the rhythm slowed and the lyrics were stretched long with the somber tonality of the Negro spirituals. How would a song to encourage your soul sound? and

Sights: (v. 14) God remembers that we are just dust. As a parent looks at his or her child with compassion, remembering the joy of the child’s birth and his/her undeniable connection to the child coming into being, envision God looking at humanity, remembering the joy that came when we were first formed from the dust of the earth. (v. 15) Also, see the pit, eagles, grass and angels doing God’s bidding.

Note

1. For more information see “Cancer and African Americans.” The Office of Minority Health. Online location: <http://www.omhrc.gov/templates/content.aspx?lvl=3&lvlID=4&ID=2826> accessed 19 January 2008