

Today in our Lenten series, Pause, we will take a look at Psalm 63 and how it connects us to the concept of blessings. Psalm 63 is a hymn that leads us to think about blessing in light of trusting God. Psalm 63 invites us to consider the many, many ways we experience blessings in our lives.

As I was preparing for our sermon, blessings initially took me in a different direction. It took me to those times when I experienced blessings offered at a family meal. Think back to your childhood. Thanksgivings, Christmases, Easters, Family Reunions. One patriarch or matriarch would be selected to give the blessing for the meal. And how often did that blessing end up like this one.

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While a blessing like that was uncomfortable at best and more likely dehumanizing, I can't forget other times when I've asked someone how they are doing, and they've answered, "I'm blessed." Who else has experienced that? Maybe it was you who answered that way. If you received such an answer, don't you wish you'd done something besides move on? Don't you wish you'd asked them, "Tell me some of the ways in which you've been blessed today?"

I think about the way our culture has moved with regards to communicating and connecting with family. When I was growing up it was all about handwritten letters and cards to relatives. I remember my mom standing over me to make sure I wrote thank you letters when I'd received gifts. Even to my Aunt Billie, who sent me a package in the mail. Now, you all know how exciting it is as a child to get package addressed to you from anyone. I couldn't wait to open this package. It was for my birthday. Finally the day arrived and I tore open that package. What did Aunt Billie send me? I looked in the package and my excitement turned to a grimace. Aunt Billie sent me...a slip. Yes, she sent me a piece of underwear. And yes, I did write a thank you note to her for that slip.

Today communication is very different. Texts, emails, video chats, social media. And we may hear or see these communications punctuated with a phrase like, "Blessings on your day."

When we use such a sign off, what does it really mean? Does it carry significance or is it just an acceptable way to respond? Does it have any feelings or expressions behind it? If you use this, as I do, do you think about that person and the blessing you are giving them or how this person has been a blessing in your life? I could do better.

During my high school years I lived in Nixa, Missouri. Close to Branson, the second home of country music. Quite often, when someone didn't know how to respond to something, they would simply say, "Well, Bless Your Heart." It's nice, right? It kind of ties in with that thing that our parents tell us, "If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all."

Blessings are something that we as churches are pretty good at. We bless backpacks before children go back to school. At the end of each service we have a blessing. A benediction is how we are sent off with a blessing. Before we eat, we bless our food and give thanks to God for the friends who nurture our souls and the food that nourishes our bodies.

We have so many ways of understanding what blessing is, what it means to receive a blessing, and what it means to give a blessing. When people say they are "blessed", might they be recognizing the gift of God's presence in their lives?

As we move through Lent, today's Psalm provides a way for us to think about blessings as it is used in this hymn of trust in God, and it invites us to consider the ways we experience blessings in our lives.

The superscription for Psalm 63 says it is a "Psalm of David, when he was in the Wilderness of Judah." Scholars really don't know which wilderness is being referenced here. Some think it is David referring to when he was a young man running away from King Saul. A wilderness setting can have a physical and spiritual meaning. We can experience droughts in both areas. But then David remembers a time. In a temple. Where he knows God's presence. Where he wasn't hungry or thirsty. Where he felt full of God's hesed-God's steadfast love.

Psalm 63 has a very simple form. In verse 1 & 2, David's vivid words describe the depth of his longing for God. In her commentary, Robin Branch suggests that "this psalm present the idea that longing is healthy, that thirst for God's presence invites and brings God's presence and that God's presence satisfies longings." Longing is good. It is not a sign of lack but an indication of strength, insight, health.

In verses 3-5 we hear blessings and praise from the song writer. Verse 3 is the clearest statement of faith. "Your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you." Think about what this says about David and more importantly what it says about God? J. Clinton McCann Jr says, "In a real sense, "steadfast love" is something like a one-word summary of the character of God." Steadfast love is a familiar term used frequently in other psalms and other settings to describe a person's experience with the constancy of God's love.

Verse 6-8 express the author's confidence in God's abiding presence. The psalmist repeats the word soul 3 times in verse 1, 5, and 8. This is a soul that thirsts. This is a soul that is satisfied. By verse 8, we have a psalmist whose soul is clinging to God. Close your eyes and imagine it. Dave holding on to God as God's right hand reaches out to support him. This is the frame of the words of trust in God's presence with him. Church family...now can you imagine you standing in the place of David. I hope so, because this promise is for you too. "My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me." Our souls cling to God. God's right hand upholds us. Say that with me.

Reading Psalm 63 during Lent typically ends with verse 8. But the psalm continues through verse 11 and it takes on a very different tone. It moves to words of vengeance and a final statement of response. Perhaps, as Richard Stern suggests, "The complete psalm offers a more realistic ebb and flow of the appropriation of God's grace." The idea that we as humans move with the spirit of God and at a moments notice can switch to instincts of vengeance and violence.

As we compare translations and paraphrases, today we will look at Psalm 63:2-4a. Note how the ways they invite us to think about the ways to trust in God.

Robert Alter – The Hebrew Bible: So, in the sanctum I beheld You, seeing Your strength and Your glory. For your kindness is better than life. My lips praise You. Thus I will bless You while I live.

CEB: Yes, I've seen you in the sanctuary; I've seen your power and glory. My lips praise you because your faithful love is better than life itself! So I will bless you as long as I'm alive.

Pamela Greenberg-The Complete Psalms – In holy places, I have gazed for you, hoping to witness your power and glory, for your kindness is better than life. My lips will praise you; I will bless you my entire life.

The Message: So here I am in the place of worship, eyes open, drinking in your strength and glory. In your generous love I am really living at last! My lips brim praises like fountains. I bless you every time I take a breath.

In light of these translations and our paraphrase let's consider the 3 ideas expressed in Psalm 63.

First, the song writer clearly knows God's presence when he is in a place of worship. When he's in the sanctum, the sanctuary, the holy place. But he also knows the presence of God outside of these places. In verse 6 he acknowledges how close he feels to God at night. "when I think of you on my bed and meditate on you in the watches of the night". Do we feel this too? Do we feel God's presence outside of these walls?

Second, notice the focus on blessing. Vs 4 the song writer promises to bless God "while I live", "as long as I am alive" "with my entire life" "everytime I take a breath". Would you just love to ask the psalmist, "What do you mean when you say you bless God?" What answer would we

receive? How would you answer that question? My guess is, we all do it differently and that's ok.

On Ash Wednesday we learned about a breath prayer. A prayer where you breathe in with air that fills your lungs and breathe out with a blessing to God. In this prayer we acknowledge that we bless God when we act faithfully in our interactions with others. We bless God when we work for justice. We bless God when we take care of all creation.

Looking at the translation by Pamela Greenberg, we see a different way of thinking about blessing God. "I will bless you with my entire life." What comfort, because Church family there will be times when we are just going to feel absent from God's presence or estranged because of something we have done. Here's the good news. God will be waiting. Always present, always ready to renew our connection.

Psalm 63, so appropriate for Lent. It invites our considerations of the ways God sustains our lives. It's a window into hearing how God's presence is experienced as a blessing in all phases of our lives. We are invited to respond to this open window. To be honest about our relationship with God. To be transparent about our own experiences of blessings and being blessed.

Now the context for the author's praise and trust in God is worship in the temple. This is where God's presence is experienced. It's where we hear that yearning for God's presence. As if in a dry and weary land with no water.

Have you ever been in that kind of parched place in your life of faith? How would you describe it? Where will you find connection with the words in Psalm 63?

In Psalm 63 we find an author who is confident in God's love and willing to attest with bold assurance of God's presence. Eugene Peterson adds color to this assertion when he says, "I bless you every time I take a breath." (Repeat, have everyone say with me)

When we talk about blessings, how often do we think of it as receiving verse giving? This psalm challenges us to think about it differently. Yes, God blesses us. But guess what? We can and do bless God too. How? With our whole lives. With every breath we take. We bless God while we live. (Repeat)

Close your eyes for a moment. Now imagine in just that last few moments your words and actions have blessed God. How they made God feel good. How they brought thankfulness for God's presence. How we were able to acknowledge God's abiding presence in all of creation. (Count to 10)

Our spiritual practice this week is the lectio divina which I will share in the devotion that comes out in the connection this week.

Church family, Psalm 63 offers us a window into the soul of one who knows God's intimate presence. One who's blessed because of that relationship. Psalm 63 is a model for our lives of faith. When we experience the blessings of God, we can and should look for places and people with whom we can share something of the goodness, kindness, mercy, and love of God – to extend that blessing in turn. Because church family, these are blessings that we know we can share.