

The Resilience of Gratitude

March 14, 2021, Lent IV

Psalm 107

Rev. Tim Phillips



Thank you, Pastor Patricia, and thank you and Phyllis Byrdwell for this Lenten Prayer Hymn, “I love the Lord, who heard my cry.” It touches me every time I hear it. I can’t get through it, even after 4 weeks of hearing it every week, without tears. And I guess that’s the point: “I love the Lord, who heard my cry.”

Those of you in the Bible Study group will recognize that this is the language of the Psalms. The psalmist is either praising God or crying out to God. In most psalms, it’s both.

The psalm for today is 107 and crying out to God is a theme:

vs. 6: “Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble;

vs. 13: “Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble;

vs. 19: “Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble;

vs. 28: “Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble.

And each of these “cries” refers to a different kind of trouble:

Those who are exiles and can’t find their way home – those “who wandered in the desert, finding no way to an inhabited town; hungry and thirsty, [so that] their soul fainted within them.”

Those who are imprisoned – who “sit in darkness and in gloom, prisoners in misery and in irons.”

Those who are so sick they can’t even stand the sight of food and “draw near to the gates of death.”

Those who are at the mercy of the forces of nature who, like sailors, “reel and stagger like drunk people” being tossed by giant waves – they are “at their wits’ end.”

And, according to Psalm 107, God has an answer for each one of these:

For the exiles, God gathers those who have been scattered and guides them in their path toward home.

For the imprisoned, God breaks “their bonds asunder” [that’s a line from Handel’s *Messiah*’s] and breaks every chain [like that great Black gospel song by the same name].

For the sick, God heals.

And for the tempest-tossed, with the winds whistling in their ears, God calms the storm and brings quiet.

Now if you were hoping for the mechanics of *how* God makes all that happen, it's not here. There aren't 10 easy steps to calm the storms of your life. There are no magical cures. No plan for a quick end to oppression. No guarantee that we will never be or feel homeless.

The psalmist simply says that God addresses all these but doesn't tell us how. Like most of these transitions in the Psalms - from trouble to some kind of deliverance – how it happens is a mystery.

And maybe that's a good thing. Maybe it means that there isn't any particular thing to do or any single perfect path to follow because we would probably mess it up anyway.

Or maybe there's no particular thing because it could be *anything!* It could be something we didn't expect. It could be somebody's harebrained idea that saves the world. It could be something we would otherwise discount or minimize, like a smile or a hug or the sound of someone's voice. It could be anything that shows up and changes your life in ways you never imagined.

But perhaps the psalmist *does* leave us one clue.

Every "Then they cried to the Lord" is matched with a "Let them *thank* God for God's steadfast love."

Maybe gratitude has something to do with it.

Here's how the pattern works in the first section of Psalm 107, vss. 1-9 – and I'm reading from the *Inclusive Bible*:

"Give thanks for God's goodness;

God's love endures forever!"

Let these be the words of God's redeemed,

those redeemed from the oppressor's clutches,

those brought home from foreign lands,

from east and west, from northern lands and southern seas.

Some lost their way in the wilderness, in the wasteland,

not knowing how to reach an inhabited town;

they were hungry and thirsty,

and their courage was running low.

They called – or cried - to God in their trouble,

and God rescued them from their sufferings,

guiding them by a direct route

to an inhabited town.

Let them thank God for God's great love,

*for the marvels done for all people –
for God has satisfied the thirsty
and filled the hungry with good things.*

This exact pattern, “They called or cried to God” and “Let them *thank* God,” continues three more times throughout the psalm. The only thing that changes are the situations in between.

Now we know that gratitude has the power to change things.

I’ve been re-reading Diana Butler Bass’ book, *Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks*. There’s a lot there. I recommend it.

By the way, Dr. Bass will be with us in April to talk about her new book, *Freeing Jesus*, and she will be preaching for us on April 18.

In the *Grateful* book she says: “... the emotions of gratitude serve as the foundation of personal *resilience* and joy.”

When psychologists speak of resilience [she writes] they are referring to our capacity to grow into our best selves – to be healthy, creative, emotionally balanced, and mature people. Positive emotions, like gratitude, foster resiliency ...

And then she cites research that shows how even physical resilience is an outcome of gratitude.

Maybe that’s what the psalmist has in mind in Psalm 107 – in whatever circumstance you find yourself, gratitude will help you through – perhaps even change you.

One of the most helpful things I carry with me from Bass’ book is the difference between “targeted gratitude” and “untargeted gratitude.”

Targeted gratitude is when we know who gave the gift and we are thankful to them for it. It’s why we say “thank you” and write “thank you” cards and sometimes “return favors.” This is the ordinary social convention that we are taught when our parents told us to say “thank you” to that nice person who gave us that piece of candy.

And this kind of gratitude does have a religious connection. To this day, when Patrick and I come upon a great parking place, we say “God is so good” because that’s what my dad always said when finding a particularly convenient parking space.

Of course, this kind of targeted gratitude aimed at God has its problems. What about all those other people who were looking for a good parking space and didn’t find one? Is God not good to them?

You can extend these questions into health and money and survival. Why did some hundred-year-olds survive the pandemic and some teenagers didn’t?

Bass says that she began to notice that her own gratitude diary had become “a kind of list of the benefits of being a middle-class white person.” She says, if you really want to know what gratitude is, “Pay attention to those who have suffered and who found gratefulness ... Embrace the sorrows of your own heart.” In other words, listen for the gratitude of those in Psalm 107 who know exile and homelessness, oppression, sickness, and wave after wave of disorientation and loss.

When targeted gratitude becomes our thankfulness to God for making us better off than others and privileged enough to be practically immune from suffering, both gratitude and God need some re-thinking.

“Untargeted gratitude,” she says, is “feeling grateful when there is no one to thank.” It is “the deep ability to embrace the gift of who we are, *that we are*, that in the multibillion-year history of the universe each one of us has been born, can love, grow in awareness, and has a story.”

Even if you have deep issues with God and have trouble with the implications of a targeted gratitude that makes God the source of all good things, gratitude still matters. You can still wake up and give thanks for the sun rising and your body being blessed with air and food and, in some days, touch. As Pastor Patricia prayed today, “Thank you for waking us up this morning.”

Now I will admit that Psalm 107 is targeted gratitude. But, at the depths of thanking God,” is the resilience that comes with acknowledging the mystery of our own existence and a steadfast love that seems never to let us go.

It was one thing for my Dad to respond to a prize parking spot with “God is so good.” It was another thing altogether for him to keep saying it after years of struggling with multiple myeloma – a blood cancer that began to rip his body apart. Whatever flux there was in his ideas about God, what made him resilient in all of it was gratitude for a love that held on to him no matter what.

This resilient gratitude is “the deep ability to embrace the gift of who we are, *that we are* ... [and that] each one of us has been born, can love, [can] grow in awareness, and has a story.”

Charlotte Elliot has a story. She was born into a Christian home in 1789 in England. Some kind of ill health had left her with severe pain and, as is often the case with chronic pain, she could be irritated and short with people.

One day, a visiting clergymen was at dinner in her family’s home and he asked Charlotte if she was a Christian and might use her gifts in the service of God. She erupted in some rude comeback and that was the end of the conversation. Imagine the anger at this stranger’s presumption and at God and at herself for being, as she describes, “useless.” Maybe you don’t have to imagine.

But the question kept working on her and a few days later she met the clergyman again and said: "I want to come to Jesus; but I don't know how."

"Why not come just as you are," he said.

And Charlotte Elliot wrote a poem that became one of the most recognizable in the modern church. Eventually she wrote 282 hymns and became the editor of a magazine and a songbook.

I suspect life didn't miraculously get any easier for Charlotte. But her resilient gratitude – to deeply embrace the gift of who she was with all the ability she needed to love and grow and tell a story – gave us a hymn that I have sometimes loved to hate.

For all its problematic connections, there is something powerful about the deep genuine testimony of Charlotte Elliot and the truth she learned in her own experience of suffering – that the way to come to God or to move through life, is "just as I am."

[Hymn: "Just As I Am"]

NOTES

The *Inclusive Bible*, Priests for Equality (Rowan & Littlefield Publishers, 2007). Diana Butler Bass, *Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks* (HarperOne, 2018), see (in order) pp. 34, 68, 24-25 (and in relation to God, pp.26-27), 42-45, 76. There are two accounts of the writing of "Just As I Am" by Charlotte Elliot at STEM Publishing: Hymns: Spiritual Songsters: Miss Charlotte Elliot, 1789-1871.