**Healing Hands, Wide Embrace**

**Text: Psalm 103:1-14**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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Before I get into the text, I want to share with you all a bit about what I did last week. I took a week of study leave to participate in a training event for the Xplor program, which is a ministry of our denomination, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Some of you know about Xplor; it’s the program that our own Ashlyn Reynolds participated in 2 years ago. It’s a leadership development and vocational discernment program for young adults who are in their 20’s; young adults who are trying to figure out what God is calling them to do with their lives. It operates out of 5 different sites where 4 young adults live together in community. One of those sites is Bloomington-First Christian Church. When the Xplor leadership team approved Bloomington as a site, they said, “It would be good if you could involve several neighboring Disciples churches in the program.” Armed with that knowledge, Pastor Helen turned to one of her neighboring colleagues and said, “I need someone to be the Spiritual Companion for these 4 residents.” That colleague would be…me. So I got clarity on what a Spiritual Companion does – meeting with the residents once a week to do some theological reflection and some community building and to have some fun – and I said, “I could do that!” Last week I was being trained to do all of that, and so much more. I met our 4 residents – whom you all will meet in the next few months – and I learned about the kind of community engagement and justice-seeking and vocational work in which they’ll be engaged. And I learned about the scriptures; and I learned about myself.

Which brings us to the Psalms: specifically, to Psalm 103. I was led to this Psalm when *I* was in a period of vocational discernment. Except in my case I hadn’t recently graduated from college like most of the Xplor folks. I was already ordained and had been serving in a church for a few years. But I was still trying to decide what I wanted to be when I grew-up. I wasn’t at all sure that I’d been called to ministry. I was confused. I was depressed. And God seemed very distant.

That’s when someone suggested that I pray with the scriptures; especially the Psalms; especially…Psalm 103.

 Let me tell you a bit about the Psalms. They reflect the whole range of human emotions: from the greatest joy to the deepest despair. Some Psalms are shouts of praise to the goodness of God: shouts of great joy and thanksgiving. Like Ps. 150: “Praise the Lord! Praise God in his sanctuary! Praise God with trumpet sound! Let everything that breaths praise the Lord!!” Some Psalms are shouts of praise…and some Psalms are cries of agony. Like Ps. 130: “Out of the depths I cry to thee, O Lord.” We turn to God in both our times of greatest joy and our times of deepest despair. And the Psalms help us to do so.

Now, some folks might say, “What do you mean, despair? Christians don’t suffer from despair. Christians don’t suffer from depression. If you’re a *real* Christian, you’re always full of joy! Bosh rockies! And I’m tempted to use even stronger language. The presence of despair in the Psalms, the struggles of St. Paul, the agony of Jesus himself when he cried from the Cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?!;” all of these put the lie to the notion that real Christians are always happy. Real Christians get sick, just like everyone else. Real Christians suffer from afflictions of body, mind and spirit, just like everyone else. Faith is a powerful thing, to be sure; but faith does not somehow rescue us from the many burdens that are part and parcel of the human experience.

So I’m 28 years old, struggling with my vocation, depressed, guilt-ridden, and ready to give up. That’s when I was introduced to Ps. 103:

“Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless God’s holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits—who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy…”

I’m praying with this scripture, which means that I’m reading it a phrase at a time, pausing, letting the words sink into my spirit, paying attention to the feelings that the words trigger, listening to what the Holy Spirit is saying to me. And what the Spirit said was this:

“Trust me. I will heal you.

“Trust me. I will forgive you.

“Trust me. I will lift you out of the pit of despair.

“Trust me. Trust me. Trust me.”

That’s what the Spirit said to me. God said, “I’m not going to do all these things in the *way* that you might want me to. I’m going to do all these things *when* you might want me to. But trust me to do with your life the very things that I will for you. And it’s going to be glorious!”

You see, before God can heal anything else, God has to heal our spirits. Because if my spirit is filled with anxiety or guilt or grief or anger that I refuse to let go of, then I’m not leaving God a whole lot of room to maneuver. Imagine that God is a running back, carrying a football marked “grace” to the end zone that is your heart. And anxiety and guilt are like a formidable defensive line. And grief and anger are hanging back there in the secondary. And as long as those things are lingering deep within you, grace doesn’t have much of a chance of maneuvering through that defense and doing a happy dance in the end zone of your heart. In my experience, the first thing that needs to be healed is the anxiety, and the antidote for anxiety is trust, so what I heard God saying to me is Ps. 103 and in Ps. 131 and in Ps 139 especially was – and is – “Trust me. Let me heal your anxiety. And then we can take care of all those other afflictions – all of those other dis-eases – that are wearing down your body and your soul.”

You see, God doesn’t always promise physical healing. But God does promise healing. God doesn’t always promise to lift the burden of diabetes or cancer or arthritis or depression or whatever your affliction might be. Yes, sometimes there *is* physical healing and that’s one reason why we often pray for physical healing. But sometimes it’s a healing of the spirit so that we can bear the burden that continues, and maybe even use that burden in a way that will help to bring healing to others. I mean, I still get depressed from time to time. I probably will for the rest of my life. But I’ve learned how to use that depression to be a better pastor. So if you come to me when you’re feeling depressed; if you come to me when you find yourself in the pit of despair, I’m not going to say to you, “You shouldn’t feel that way.” I’m not going to say to you, “Get over it. Suck it up.” I’m not going to do that because I know from my own experience that it won’t work. But I am going to listen to you. I am going to let you know that whatever you’re feeling, it’s ok. I might be able to suggest a therapist that you might want to see and some psalms that you might want to read. And I am going to offer to pray with you. Because we worship a God with healing hands. We worship a God who heals our afflictions. And that healing begins with prayer; and with trust.

Let me tell you some stories of healing.

Several weeks ago our Bedford-FCC Prayer Group was gathered in the Parlor. This group is the embryo of our healing ministry as envisioned in Our Future Story. The Prayer Group gathered, we prayed over one member of the congregation who was physically with us, and then we offered prayer for another member whom we knew had had a rough day, wrestling with several afflictions and burdens. That other member was not in the room, she didn’t know that we were praying for her, but what she did know was that somewhere around 7 pm, some of the pain that she’d been feeling all day began to ease. And it was about that time that the group had been in prayer for her. Was there a direct connection between those prayers and her relief? I don’t know. It can’t be conclusively proven one way or the other. What I do know is that I’ve heard enough stories like that over the years that I’m encouraged to keep praying for healing. Because we worship a God with healing hands.

Several decades ago when I was serving churches in Canada, the Toronto Star had a religion editor named Tom Harpur. Mr. Harpur was an Episcopal priest (or, as we say in Canada, an Anglican priest) who’d left the ministry because he could no longer believe a lot of the basic tenets of Christianity. But he retained an interest in religion. Sometime around 1980 he started to research a book on spiritual healing. In the course of his research he met a faith healer. His agenda was to debunk her, and to debunk the whole notion that healing can come through prayer or the laying on of hands. When he met her, she immediately reached out to him and shook his hand. Not just a polite little handshake, but the kind of double-handed, heartfelt handshake that use to be a standard feature of every minister’s tool kit. And as she held Tom Harpur’s hands, he felt a warmth in her hands that he’d never felt before. And something that felt almost electric ran up his arms. And he couldn’t deny that there was some kind of power in her hands. I don’t clearly remember the rest of the story, but it seems to me that he went on to witness some of her healings, and then he did extensive research on the whole notion of faith healing, and by the time he wrote his book he’d become convinced that there are folks who have a genuine gift of healing; that healing touch and healing prayer are important tools alongside doctors and medicine and surgery and all of the other tools of medical science. Because we worship a God with healing hands.

Sometimes, when prayer groups and healing circles get together, they sing. Sometimes they sing songs that are specifically about healing, like *There Is a Balm in Gilead*. Because music is also a means by which the healing hands of God can touch us. Like back in the horror-filled days when perhaps 10 million of God’s children were enslaved in this country over the course of 250 years. And their lives were burdened not just by the back-breaking labor that they were forced to do, not just by the torture that they had to endure when they tried to escape, not just by the diseases that resulted from being ill-housed and ill-fed, but also by the spiritual burden of being view as sub-human; of being viewed as something less than God’s child. They were spiritually and physically and economically afflicted! Music brought a degree of healing. Singing together in community brought a degree of healing. Singing spirituals like “Steal away…to Jesus.” Music helped to heal the spirit so that they could endure the burdens. Music helped to heal the soul so that they had the courage to escape. Indeed, music sometimes served as a signal that a conductor on the Underground Railroad was hiding in the woods and tonight was the night to head north and experience healing as liberation; to experience healing as justice. That conductor might’ve been singing, “Steal away…to *freedom*.” To steal away to Jesus is ultimately to steal away to freedom, whatever your affliction; and when you’re poor and oppressed that means to experience the healing power of God at the *root* of your affliction. Because we worship a God with healing hands.

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all God’s benefits: who heals your diseases, who redeems your life from the Pit, who works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed. The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. With his healing hands and wide embrace, God enfolds all people everywhere in a beloved community. Until that day when we will be gathered up in the community of saints from every age and place, and death and disease and mourning and crying and oppression and pain shall be no more. Thanks be to God.