

Bless the LORD, O my
soul: and all that is
within me, bless his holy
name. Bless the LORD, O
my soul, and forget not
all his benefits:

Psalm 103:1-2

Welcome

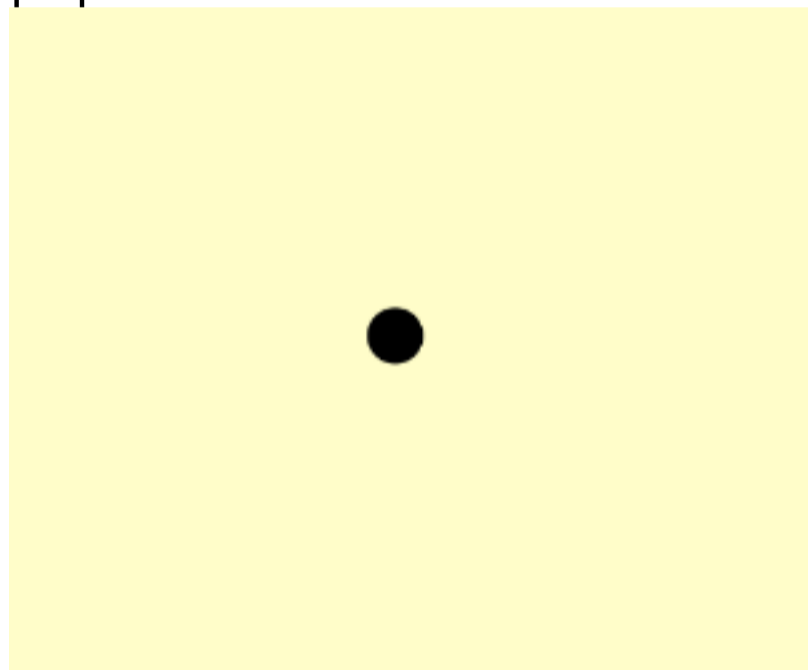
Hymn “Glorify Thy Name” (FWS #2016)

Scripture Psalm 103:1-2

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless God’s holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits.

Message “Praise God!”

A minister was leading a workshop with a group of church people, and he held up a large piece of paper with a black dot in the middle of the paper.



What Do You See?

The pastor held the paper up and asked, “What do you see?” Someone said, “I see a black dot.” “Right, the minister said, “What else do you see?” No one spoke. Silence. Finally, he asked, “Don’t you see anything other than the dot?” “No,” came the chorus of answers. “I’m surprised,” the pastor commented. “You have completely overlooked the most important thing of all – the sheet of paper.” He explained how often we are distracted by the small, dot-like disappointments of painful experiences, or how we dwell on the negative things that we experience and forget the many blessings we receive from God. Like the sheet of paper, the good things – the blessings – are so much more than the often-smaller challenges we face every day. (adapted from Our Daily Bread, R.W.D., March 10 found at <http://classic.net.bible.org/illustration.php?id=5612>)

When we look at the big picture, we can remember to count our blessings – every day, not just once in a while or when we happen to think of it. Psalm 103, verse 1 says, “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless God’s holy name!”

During this past year and a half, we have gone through a pandemic, facing challenges, big and small. And now, just as we thought the virus is finally declining, a variant that is more aggressive shows up. These have really been trying times, haven’t they! Maybe some of us have lost loved ones to the COVID virus, like my family did when my dad died from it. I know many others have lost loved ones, contracted the virus (including some of my family), and others who have been isolated for months.

Recently, I heard a news report that drug addiction had risen, more people have had mental health issues, and suicide rates have gone up. Being separated from each other has been difficult to say the least, so we can understand why many people have been depressed, in despair, and wondering when this will ever end.

In the midst of it, though, others have discovered the gifts of God: people taking care of people, even if it is from a distance. Actions of caring, such as grocery runs for someone else, picking up someone’s mail, making phone calls, sending cards, keeping in touch by email, offering acts of love by waving outside a window, sending video messages, using Zoom or FaceTime or Skype, and so many other ways of reaching out to others. There are also many opportunities we have been given, such as here at First UMC where we took this time to do some much needed work on our building, and thanks to the generous gifts of some of the saints who thought to leave bequests to help fund the work, we have repaired, renewed, and refreshed our beautiful, historic building.

From a pandemic that shut everything down, we have been able to, as one person said, “Keep our eyes on the donut, rather than the hole.” Our goal was to praise God through updating our building, as well as

following a vision that came from several years of planning. The pandemic pushed us to think forward to what we would like to do for the future of our ministry and mission here in the greater Portsmouth area. So, not only did we restore, refresh, and renew our building, but we formed a vision for connecting more effectively with others in our community of faith as well as in the community around us. We believe God is calling us to live outward, even as we celebrate our worship space, our ministry of the building, and look forward to worshipping in person in just a few weeks.

Mentioning all this is a reminder to me, and to everyone, to keep our minds open to the hand of God in all things, to see beyond the black dot, to look at the whole picture, to count our blessings, and to bless God.

What does that mean: to bless God? My reaction when I was researching and thinking about where God was leading me for today's message was to think about all the ways we have been blessed. But then, in some of my readings, I was reminded that the passage is "Bless the Lord, O my soul." Blessing God is about responding to God's care for us. Blessing God is about praising God, giving thanks to God for so many things. Psalm 103, verse 2: "Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all God's benefits."

Our ways of living can focus on God and all God has given us, done for us, provided for us, even in the midst of a pandemic! It's about worshipping God and giving God praise. The Psalms, and many other biblical passages are full of acts of worship and praise for all God has done. In Psalm 148, for example, even nature praises God. We praise God in the way we live our lives, too.

The Rev. Dr. Todd Speed from the Decatur, Georgia Presbyterian Church wrote in a paraphrase from C.W. Lewis*:

If we are going to be (impacted by a coronavirus), let that (virus) when it comes, find us doing sensible and human things—praying, working, reading, listening to music, bathing the children, playing tennis, chatting to our (family) over a (meal) and (playing) a game—not huddled together like frightened sheep and thinking about the worst that can happen. (These world crises), Lewis wrote, “may break our bodies but they need not dominate our minds.” (from A Reflection on Psalm 103 for the Second Sunday of Covid 19, Posted on 21 Mar 2020, *<https://www.dpchurch.org/sermon/reflection-on-psalm-103/>)

“Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless God’s holy name.” Praising God can take many forms. We can praise and thank God even as we go through the toughest of times because there is always a light at the end of the tunnel; there is always the chance for a new way, a new and improved life, a new and updated hope for living. We will come out stronger in at the end of the tunnel. When we read farther into Psalm 103, we are reminded that we praise God because we are forgiven, healed, redeemed from the pit, and crowned with God’s faithful love and mercy. (vv. 3-4)

It is in that hope and that promise that we praise and thank God. It is in that hope that we live and pray and act as God’s children. As Dr. Todd Speed writes: *“The psalm’s primary concern is not the current human condition, but the wonder and majesty of an Almighty God, to whom we belong forever. The psalmist reminds us that our ultimate concern, even in the midst of uncertain and fearful times, does not have to be the vulnerability of our human condition. Our ultimate concern can become the spirit in which we turn to God in hope and turn to neighbor in love. Let us look to God, our Creator, for comfort and let us turn to others to help and be helped.”* (ibid)

How will each of us praise God this week: through music, enjoying nature, helping someone else, caring for ourselves and our families, taking time to offer prayers of thanks, or whatever we need to do in order to remember that God is with us, walking with us through this pandemic, offering us comfort and care through family and friends – and maybe even strangers – giving us hope that the future is full of opportunities? “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless God’s holy name.”

Let us see the whole picture. Let us recognize God’s gifts of forgiveness, grace, mercy, and love. Let us praise and thank God with all of who we are as God’s children! Praise God!

Prayer

Holy God, you bless us, and you give us the gifts of love, life, and grace. Yet, so often we forget to give you thanks and to share those gifts with others. You long for us to make a commitment to having a relationship with you, but there are times when we neglect to even speak with you during the day or to listen for your voice. Help us to remember that you have given us everything, including eternal life. May we remember to bless your holy name and share the gifts you have given us with others. With praise and thanksgiving, we offer our prayers and give thanks for your forgiveness and steadfast love. Amen.

Lord’s Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not in temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.

Hymn “O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing,” vv. 1,2,3 (UMH #57)

Sending Forth



WE LIFT UP IN PRAYER

Juliann
Joan Allen
Naomi
Erin Frane
Madeline
Charles Gilman
Josh Jones
Jenn
Gary
Joyce's Family

Harry Junkins
Marilyn & Gil
Donna Smith
Sophia
Bobbie Noble
Dan Strange
Danny Westbrook
Marion Collishaw
Mark & Sarah
Delores

Arial
Terry Sessions
Vicky & Emily
Christine & her parents
Those in nursing and assisted living care
Our Church family



WHO WE ARE

FUMC PORTSMOUTH A RECONCILING CONGREGATION

We, the congregation of the First United Methodist Church of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, are dedicated in worshipping, learning, and serving with all people as we embrace Jesus Christ's message of love and acceptance. As a United Methodist Church we stand fully behind the statement "Open Hearts, Open Minds, and Open Doors". We celebrate our diversity and invite all persons regardless of age, gender, racial or ethnic background, sexual orientation, marital or socioeconomic status, nationality, physical or mental ability into full membership and participation in the life of this community of faith.



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