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Psalm 103
A Psalm of David
(RSV)

Psalm 103 is a beautiful expression of praise and gratitude, rendered in the form of a hymn. It may well be that when this Psalm was initially used in public worship it was sung as a solo.

Vv. 1-5

**¹ Bless the LORD, O my soul;
and all that is within me, bless his Holy Name!**

The parallel thoughts of verse 1 has a chiastic arrangement: a,b,b,a. Thus, "bless the LORD" parallels "bless His Holy Name," and "O my soul" parallels "all that is within me." Whoever prays this Psalm summons his/her whole being to its deepest recesses to praise God: whole heart, whole soul, whole mind. And Yahweh, the LORD, is the Holy Name, and the Holy Name is Yahweh, and none other.

**² Bless the LORD, O my soul,
and forget not all his benefits,
³ who forgives all your iniquity,
who heals all your diseases,
^{4a} who redeems (rescues) your life from the Pit (the grave),**

It is noteworthy that as the Psalmist begins to list the reasons why we should bless the LORD, forgiveness tops the list. In the Old Testament times, verse 4a probably meant a rescue *before* going down into the grave; the New Testament believer will also understand this as a rescue even *after* death, on the basis of the completed work of Christ and His resurrection.

^{4b} who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,

Steadfast love is that attribute of God by which he loves us, despite the unsteadiness and fickleness of our love for Him. Mercy is that compassionate attribute of God which prevails over anger.

**⁵ who satisfies you with good as long as you live
so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.**

The eagle is Israel's paradigm of strength and longevity. The annual molt of the eagle renews its fresh appearance. Recall Isaiah 40:31:

**They who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up
with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and
not faint.**

* * * * *

Vv. 6-14

- 6 The LORD works vindication
and justice for all who are oppressed.**
**7 He made known his ways to Moses,
his acts to the people of Israel.**
**8 The LORD is merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.**

Verse 7a refers to the prayer of Moses as found in Exodus 33:13, and verse 8 echoes God's answer to that prayer as expressed in Exodus 34:6. More on this in the reflection guide below.

- 9 He will not always chide** (accuse),
nor will he keep his anger forever.
**10 He does not deal with us according to our sins,
nor requite** (repay) **us according to our iniquities.**
**11 For as the heavens are high above the earth,
so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;**
**12 as far as the east is from the west,
so far he removes our transgressions from us.**
13 As a father pities (has compassion for) **his children,
so the LORD pities** (has compassion for) **those who fear him.**
**14 For he knows how we were made;
he remembers that we are dust.**

For some reason those who framed the Lectionary ask us to stop in our use of this Psalm with verse 13. Do they seriously imagine that we cannot handle the reality that verse 14 describes? We are dust. God remembers that we are dust, for He created us that way. A part of God's mercy is that He comes to our aid precisely because he knows how weak and frail, yes, and mortal we are. What better way for us to acknowledge what God knows; how better for us to acknowledge our mortality than when we are surrounded by His repeated assurances that He abounds in steadfast love for us!

* * * * *

Vv. 15-18

- 15 As for human beings, their days are like grass;
they flourish like a flower of the field;**
**16 for the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
and its place knows it no more.**
**17 But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting
to everlasting upon those who fear him,
and his righteousness to children's children,**
**18 to those who keep his covenant,
and remember to do his commandments.**

* * * * *

Vv. 19-22

**¹⁹ The LORD has established his throne in the heavens,
and his kingdom rules over all.**

Because the LORD rules over all, therefore all – whether in heaven or on earth, whether visible or invisible – are bidden to bless Him.

²⁰ Bless the LORD, O you his angels (messengers),
you mighty ones (elite military troops) **who do his word** (bidding),
hearkening to the voice of his word! (obedient to his spoken word)
²¹ Bless the LORD, all his hosts (armies),
his ministers (royal court officials) **that do his will!**

The LORD is pictured as an oriental monarch, enthroned in heaven, surrounded with his angelic messengers and servants, his angelic armies, his angelic court officials.

²² Bless the LORD, all his works (everything the LORD has created, whether
animate or inanimate),
in all places of his dominion (that is, everywhere!).

Bless the LORD, O my soul!

Verses 19-22 are a comprehensive blessing of God. As we began the Psalm, so we end it, by summoning ourselves (body, mind, emotions, will, personality) and all of creation to praise and to bless God.

Prayer for St. Michael and All Angels:

Everlasting God, you have ordained and constituted in a wonderful order the ministry of angels and mortals. Mercifully grant that, as your holy angels always serve and worship you in heaven, so by your appointment they may help and defend us here on earth; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Prayer from the LBW to accompany Psalm 103:

Lord, you have compassion for the sinner, as a father has compassion for his children. Heal the weakness of your people and save us from everlasting death, that with the saints and angels we may praise and glorify you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

Guide for Reflection:

1. It is a good time to recall God's Commandment: 'Thou shalt not take the Name of the LORD, thy God, in vain. Recall that Luther explains not only how the Name of God is misused, but that he also calls attention to the right use of the Name of God in supplication, prayer, praise, and thanksgiving. This Psalm is perhaps the premier paradigm of how we should praise God. When you pray this Psalm, be sure that there is an exuberance in your heart, if not also in your voice, as you repeatedly say, "Bless the LORD!" And even if you don't feel like blessing the LORD, do it anyway. In this way, led by the Spirit of God, we can discipline ourselves to let the Word of God become our word.

2. Notice also how the Psalm lists numerous reasons for blessing the LORD. These begin when the Psalmist, presumably David, does not use the generic name for the Deity (*Elohim*), but instead uses the holy Name of God, the LORD (Yahweh, Jahweh, Jehovah), the Name by which God reveals His elective love for Israel, who are the heirs of the LORD's promise to Abraham. In that grace He also daily and richly blesses us, His New Testament children, with the benefits enumerated in verses 3-5. Whenever you have difficulty in feeling thankful, reread and ponder this list. In this connection it would be well to read/pray also those verses which are omitted for the Lectionary purposes for St. Michael and all Angels, some of which have been added for the eighth Sunday after Epiphany. Verses 6-7 refer specifically to the call of Moses and Israel in Exodus 33:12ff. Verses 8-10 recall the great passage on the Name of the LORD in Exodus 34:5-8, words all the more precious because they were spoken in the wake of Israel's idolatry and apostasy with the Golden Calf:

The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him (Moses) there, and proclaimed the name,
"The LORD." The LORD passed before him, and proclaimed,
"The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,
keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,
yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents
upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation."
And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth, and worshiped.

Verses 11-14 employ a series of breath-taking comparisons to convey the condescending love of the LORD. Verses 15-18 are particularly pertinent to all of us who are parents. We all soon perish, like our fathers and mothers before us. Only the steadfast love of the LORD endures. How important therefore it is to be among those to pass along the fear of that LORD to our children, to do His covenant and to keep His commandments.

3. The Psalm recognizes that we human beings are not alone in the created universe. The angelic world is bidden to join us, or we join them, in the universal praise of God. Isaac Watts: "Why should the wonders He hath wrought / Be lost in silence and forgot?" Or, better yet, in the words of the old Communion liturgy in The Lutheran Hymnal: "With angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven we laud and magnify Thy glorious Name, ever more praising Thee and saying: Holy, holy, holy, LORD God of Sabaoth; heaven and earth are full of Thy glory."

4. **A Prayer from Lancelot Andrewes** (1555-1626):

I thank Thee, O Lord, my Lord

for my being, my life, my gift of reason;

for my nurture, my preservation, my guidance;

for my education, my civil rights, my religious privileges;

for Thy gifts of grace, of nature, of this world;

for my redemption, my regeneration, my instruction in the Christian faith;

for my calling, my recalling, my manifold renewed recalling;

for thy forbearance and long-suffering, thy prolonged forbearance, many a time, many a year;

for all thy benefits I have received, and all the undertakings wherein I have prospered;

for any good I may have done;

for the use of the blessings of this life;

for Thy promise, and my hope of the enjoyment of the good things yet to come;

for all these and also for all other mercies,

known and unknown,

open and secret,

remembered by me or now forgotten,

for kindnesses received by me willingly, or even against my will,

I praise thee, I bless thee, I thank thee all the days of my life. Amen.

Walter E. Keller

September 29, 1996 – **St. Michael and All Angels** (Psalm 103:1-5, 20-22)

Edited and slightly revised for:

February 27, 2000 – **The Eighth Sunday after the Epiphany** (Psalm 103:1-13, 22)