

IT ALL COMES DOWN TO THIS! Psalm 105:1-17, 26-27, 37-45; I Peter 2:9-10

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Introduction

Before beginning the sermon, I would like to take a moment to say how grateful Lynn and I are to you Jeff and all of you for the invitation to take part in the 150th anniversary of this glorious sanctuary. I am a little creakier these days than when I arrived fresh faced as you 34-year-old pastor back in 1981 (mobility and balance issues from several maladies, the most recent being 2 torn tendons—and strict instructions to stay off my foot as much as possible). We have a picture on our refrigerator from 1987 recently sent by my cousin of us and our two young boys sitting on the back step of the OB manse—and I wonder, ‘who is that guy?’

I wondered about coming back after 30 years—so many changes in you and in us, so many people we knew and loved no longer with us. I found myself becoming a little nervous about what it would feel like. But then I heard Elaine Palmer is still singing “skinamarink-a dinky do” at Vacation Bible School, Harold Kingsley is still teaching 4th graders the virtues of the King James Bible, and Jessica Chen—a 7th grader when we moved, now sitting at the organ console, and directing the choir---and I was reassured!

It is so tempting to slip into nostalgia. I have so many treasured memories of our time here. Ministers shape churches, but so do churches shape ministers, and I am grateful for the

ways this congregation shaped me as a young minister, loving me, encouraging me, teaching me by your example, forgiving me when I made mistakes.

My text today is Psalm 105, the opening verse of which is stenciled on the arch and greets you every Sunday. It is a long psalm, so I will be reading selective verses

Read **Psalm 105:1-17, 26-27, 37-45; I Peter 2:9-10**

Psalm 105

¹O give thanks to the LORD, call on his name, make known his deeds among the peoples. ²Sing to him, sing praises to him; tell of all his wonderful works. ³Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice.

⁴Seek the LORD and his strength; seek his presence continually.

⁵Remember the wonderful works he has done, his miracles, and the judgments he uttered,

⁶O offspring of his servant Abraham, children of Jacob, his chosen ones.⁷He is the LORD our God; his judgments are in all the earth.⁸He is mindful of his covenant forever, of the word that he commanded, for a thousand generations, ⁹the covenant that he made with Abraham, his sworn promise to Isaac,¹⁰which he confirmed to Jacob as a statute, to Israel as an everlasting covenant,¹¹saying, "To you I will give the land of Canaan as your portion for an inheritance."

[¹²When they were few in number, of little account, and strangers in it,¹³wandering from nation to nation, from one kingdom to another people,¹⁴he allowed no one to oppress them; he rebuked kings on their account,¹⁵saying, "Do not touch my anointed ones; do my prophets no harm."

¹⁶When he summoned famine against the land, and broke every staff of bread,¹⁷he had sent a man ahead of them, Joseph, who was sold as a slave.[¹⁸His feet were hurt with fetters, his neck was put in a collar of iron;¹⁹until what he had said came to pass, the word of the LORD kept testing him.²⁰The king sent and released him; the ruler of the peoples set him free.²¹He made him lord of his house, and ruler of all his possessions,²²to instruct his officials at his

pleasure, and to teach his elders wisdom.²³Then Israel came to Egypt; Jacob lived as an alien in the land of Ham.²⁴And the LORD made his people very fruitful, and made them stronger than their foes,²⁵whose hearts he then turned to hate his people, to deal craftily with his servants.]

²⁶He sent his servant Moses, and Aaron whom he had chosen.²⁷They performed his signs among them, and miracles in the land of Ham.

[²⁸He sent darkness, and made the land dark; they rebelled against his words.²⁹He turned their waters into blood, and caused their fish to die.³⁰Their land swarmed with frogs, even in the chambers of their kings.³¹He spoke, and there came swarms of flies, and gnats throughout their country.³²He gave them hail for rain, and lightning that flashed through their land.³³He struck their vines and fig trees, and shattered the trees of their country.³⁴He spoke, and the locusts came, and young locusts without number;³⁵they devoured all the vegetation in their land, and ate up the fruit of their ground.³⁶He struck down all the firstborn in their land, the first issue of all their strength.]

³⁷Then he brought Israel out with silver and gold, and there was no one among their tribes who stumbled.³⁸Egypt was glad when they departed, for dread of them had fallen upon it.³⁹He spread a cloud for a covering, and fire to give light by night.⁴⁰They asked, and he brought quails, and gave them food from heaven in abundance.⁴¹He opened the rock, and water gushed out; it flowed through the desert like a river.

⁴²For he remembered his holy promise, and Abraham, his servant.⁴³So he brought his people out with joy, his chosen ones with singing.⁴⁴He gave them the lands of the nations, and they took possession of the wealth of the peoples,⁴⁵that they might keep his statutes and observe his laws. Praise the LORD!

I Peter 2:9-10 ⁹But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. ¹⁰Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our Lord shall stand forever.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, o Lord our rock and our redeemer. .

Entering the church for the dedication of the new sanctuary on Wednesday evening September 24, 1873, the congregation undoubtedly stunned by the effect. Elegant, intricate stenciling covered the walls, (far more than we see now) and the centerpiece was clearly the magnificent central arch with those words from Psalm 105: *O Give Thanks unto the Lord, Call Upon His Name, Make Known his Deeds among the Peoples.* {When some of the stenciling was restored in the 19970s they eliminated the middle section ‘call upon his name’, presumably for reasons of spacing—but it was in the original}

I wonder how they made the decision to choose that verse. Was a committee appointed in good Presbyterian fashion? Did they go at it tooth and nail with one another, as sometimes happens in committees. Did they invite suggestions from the parishioners. Did the minister, Benjamin Swan, whose extended family was prominent in the church, simply decide. What was it about this Psalm which made it compelling?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer called the Psalms the “prayerbook of the Bible.” Novelist and provocative religion commentor Anne Lamott, boiled down the essence of prayer in her simply titled book Help! Thanks! Wow! The order is different, but isn’t that what our psalm proposes our prayer to be. Thanks. Give thanks to the Lord. Help. Call upon his name. Wow. Make known his deeds among the people. This Psalm is a psalm of uplift, an affirmation of trust, a call to celebration. There are times when life evokes lament, introspective, doubt, confusion, anger--- and there are psalms which reflect that diversity of human experience. But the psalm that

adorns this sanctuary expresses confident trust, and calls for thanksgiving, praise, celebration of God's power.

Note that the body of Psalm 105 is a narration of Israel's salvation history. Why do we give thanks, and tell of his deeds, and have confidence to cry out in our need. Because, look what God has done. He made covenant with Abraham and built a people through Isaac and Jacob. He preserved the family during famine through the intervention of Joseph, and when the Egyptians made slaves of the growing nation, God set the people free, through the leadership of Moses. God provided food in the wilderness and brought the children of Israel safe into the promised land. If you have read Genesis and Exodus, you know how convoluted this story is, how improbable it is that any good will come of this history, what a dysfunction family descended from Abraham, what uncertainty and confusion there was. But the golden thread was that God was present, bringing healing and rescue and hope. God is in the business of saving his people, bringing them new life.

The Psalm which adorns this sanctuary celebrates Israel's salvation history. Which brings us to our celebration. Why do we mark events in our history? What is all the fuss about anniversaries?

I confess to a love of history. I have been accused of loving what some have told me is religious obscuranda, trivial tidbits that no one else is interested in! And maybe it is true. Now some of you may subscribe to the Henry Ford school, which says "history is bunk," though I remember he spent millions creating Greenfield village to preserve the image of 19th c. America that his brainchild, the mass produced automobile was rapidly causing to disappear.

At one level we are a history recognizing, anniversary keeping people. Candle laden pilgrims flood Graceland each year to honor the anniversary of Elvis' death. Civil rights advocates reenact 1963 march on Washington and King's "I Have a Dream" speech., Teenage boys give flowers to show they remembered the 2-month anniversary of their first date with their girlfriend. We like marking special occasions.

And perhaps enjoying this sanctuary is reason enough to mark this milestone. But given Psalms 105's message, I wonder whether we should not use this occasion to reflect on our salvation history. We have a personal salvation story, not narrowly defining that as being born anew and having our sins forgiven, though that is part of it, but salvation encompassing all that Jesus has done to heal and shape and prod us. In 150 years, there have been thousands of individual salvation stories lived out here. But there is also the salvation story of how God has been at work in this community, in this church. And one reason we mark anniversaries, why we look at history in the church, is to celebrate how our personal story has been intertwined with the church's story.

This idea of providence, of God acting in our history, personally and communally—is so Presbyterian. But it is not so easy to hold on to in a world that looks for natural explanations of everything. So often we cannot make sense of how God is in our lives without looking back. I think of how so much in my life that I once thought of as happening by chance or my choice—where I went to college, abandoning law for ministry, meeting and marrying Lynn, having children through adopting and natural birth – what I may have thought happened by chance or was my decision, now appear the hand of God, essential to my salvation history. Faith is a world view, a prism through which we understand the history of our lives.

Consider how we came to Oyster Bay. I have a confession to make. Long Island was last place I wanted to be--too much traffic, too fast paced, too many brusque people. When I got an inquiry from the committee, I thought I'd come to the interview, as practice for positions I really wanted. We drove up on Sun a.m. thinking 'why am I doing this? I am wasting their time and mine.' But at least the traffic was not so bad, I naively thought. –Sunday morning. I had no interest in coming to Long Island— Much to my surprise, we fell in love with the committee. Some of you remember the names –Ruth Imhof, Jim Evans, Stella Wilson –Harry Garrison only one still here—The committee had a sense of purpose and some clarity of what they were seeking. We clicked, and drove home excitedly –albeit with more traffic—thinking this was where God wanted us to be if the church issued a call. Chance? Or God's saving history, working out his purpose in our lives and in the church? Shakespeare said it well, “there's a divinity that shapes our ends, rough hew them how we will.” (Hamlet)

By marking milestones in the history of this church we are telling the salvation history of the saints of God, in this place. Is it an accident that you have had stability in leadership—that Jeff and I have served a combined 40 years. Are you just in a rut, or does that say something about pastor and people being well fitted and listening to the spirit and each other? I would like to think it is the latter. This too is part of this church's salvation story. By the way, Jeff, I see you are now the 2nd longest serving pastor in the church's history—and only a decade more to surpass the venerable Alexander Russell.

Although the story of our salvation history and how God is alive in our midst is serious business, we learned God does not want us to take ourselves too seriously. When a new roof was needed, you made the necessary capital campaign fun, with Don Luckenbill and Walter Wilson

getting us to dance to their “Raise the Roof Rag.” We had fun when 25 men, many of whose wives told them they could not sing, came together every Mother’s Day to belt out “Sweet, Sweet Spirit.” And then there was Gordon Hubbard, so active in the youth group, whose untimely death this year saddened us deeply, who did his best to keep me humble. After each annual Christmas pageant, with the church packed, he would say to me, “Has it ever dawned on you that on the Sunday you talk the least, our attendance is the best?” We get reminded that this place is not about me or Jeff or any of us individually. It is about the incredible ways God’s story is at work in and through and beyond us in the community of faith.

God’s saving history has been at work throughout these 150 years, in mission and acts of hospitality (like the community dinners you are doing) and pastoral care and the loving attention you gave and give one another. Church family here is more than an expression. Our boys always looked forward to Sundays—not always for the religious truths they learned in Sunday school, but because Terry and Peter Duvall would be there to play football on the church lawn or take them to Nino’s while their parents did church business after worship. Church was family.

I warned you I might get a bit nostalgic, but when I think of this signature Psalm and giving thanks and declaring God’s saving history. I think of hundreds of ordinary and extraordinary happenings, God’s story mediated in and through our story and the church’s life.

Of course, there are times in the church’s salvation story when passions run high and disputes threaten to pull us apart. Usually, these are not over theological issues. Sometimes I longed for a good debate over antinomianism or the atonement, where my training had something to offer. Rather, our disputes were mostly over sexual ethics or building issues. How

well I remember when a committee charged with repainting the church proposed restoring the Victorian multicolor scheme. One long term member and elder, declared his vigorous opposition. “This church has always been painted white and over my dead body will it be anything else.” A heated discussion ensued, but he lost the session vote and the church was painted blue, grey, and white. But it was characteristic of this elder, that on seeing the result, declared “I was wrong. It is beautiful.” His change of heart, his reconciling spirit, was a sign of grace, another illustration of God’s salvation history working personally and in the community.

Bill Johnston and I titled our history of this church A Pilgrimage of Faith to remind us that this is a dynamic story. Faith is not something fixed, settled, nailed down. Rather we are pilgrims, on the move, living out God’s salvation history now, in our time. The history of the church is not a triumphalist leap from glory to glory. It is the quirky story of real people, ordinary people through whom God works—duplicious Jacob, fretful Martha, adulterous David, irascible Paul—and you and me and a host of other saints who have populated this church. This archway affirmation, this sesquicentennial celebration, tells us we are part of something bigger, God’s salvation history, God working his purpose out. God is not yet finished with us or this church.

It is a tough time for churches, for the faith. Part of the problem is that many have reduced spirituality to subjectivity. We do not want anyone telling us what we ought to believe—certainly not a church. Increasingly there is a tendency to think of right and wrong, truth itself is what we conceive it to be. Spirituality is my truth, not objective, revealed reality.

So, call me hopelessly Calvinist— (or at least Barthian!), but whatever shape the church and God’s salvation history takes in the future, it must be rooted concretely, objectively in the person and work of Jesus Christ. As I have gotten older, I am less sure about a lot of things. I am less likely to dig in for my point of view. I know that I will never have an answer this side of paradise for the questions that puzzle me. But what I do affirm, I am more sure about. And what I am most sure about is that it all comes down to this---the gospel is the story of God’s goodness and grace, the story of ever-expanding mercy and love, the story of God’s saving work and our invitation to be part of it, declared so beautifully in that 105th psalm our forebears chose.

Renowned preaching professor Fred Craddock tells of a kid in his hometown who would believe anything you would tell him. You could say, “The schoolhouse burned down. We are not having school tomorrow.” “Oh boy!” He would believe it.

They are giving away free watermelons down at the town hall.” “Really? free watermelons.” He would go running off.

“Did you know that the President of the United States is coming to our town tomorrow?” “He is? Really? Wow!” He just believed everything.

Craddock went on “I remember once there was an evangelist who came to our town, and he said to that kid, “God loves you and cares for you and promises to be with you in Jesus Christ.’ And do you know, that kid believed it? He actually believed it.”

Dare we believe today what the saints of old confessed when they built this church—that God is alive, and is still working out salvation history in our ordinary and extraordinary lives.

What better way to celebrate this anniversary than by reaffirming the challenge put forth by this

Psalm. O give thanks to the Lord, my friends, call upon his name, make known his deeds among the peoples.

THANKS BE TO GOD WHO GIVES US THE VICTORY THROUGH JESUS CHRIST