

Providence Presbyterian Church  
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Psalm 65 – Psalms of reorientation.

We gather each Sunday to worship our Lord. Many of you have done this for years. When we worship, we sing praises to God, and we direct our attention to God. But more so, we sing of his attributes and actions and goodness. So what compels you to come to sing such praises? What has God done for you, what has God done in you that would cause you to break from our consumeristic self-focused societal rhythms, to come to turn your focus and attention to God? I suspect that no one told you to come here at your age, which makes me think that something in your heart is expressed here.

What our gospel reading and our psalm have in common this morning is an act of worship that flows from a place of forgiveness. It is a response to the grace of God extended. Psalm 65 opens: “Praise is due to you, / O God, in Zion; / and to you shall vows be performed.” The vow, *neder*, as I mentioned in the last couple of weeks, is the vow one makes at a time of distress. It is the vow one makes to offer thanksgiving and offer praise after God comes through. “When you help, God, I will come and tell the congregation what you have done.” That is what this psalm is about. The psalmist is bringing his *neder*, his vow, his song of praise that comes out of distress. This is why the psalmist breaks from daily rhythms to gather at the temple, to sing of what God has done in his life.

The psalmist continues: “O you who answer prayer! / To you all flesh shall come. / When deeds of iniquity overwhelm us, / you forgive our transgressions.” There are many ways that God may intervene in our lives. The psalmist recalls a moment when overwhelmed by his iniquity, his sins, mistakes, faults. Overwhelmed by what has come of his choices, what has come of his life. In verse 4, he proclaims that “happy are those whom you choose and bring near / to live in your courts,” suggesting, as in Ps 42, that in his place of desperation and iniquity, he was cut off from the worship and life of the temple, distant from God. But God has brought him close once again.

We are not told the details. We do not know what this iniquity was, nor what the state of being overwhelmed by it meant either. We only hear his song of praise that came out of it. We only hear the song of praise for God’s forgiveness and this new perspective and proclamation. And now, despite whatever he sought after in the past, he sings, “we shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house, / your holy temple.”

Now the woman in our gospel reading is not expressing her praise in an as culturally appropriate way as the psalmist is. She is ad-libbing, we might say. She is taking what is most important to her, and pouring out on Jesus is the most expressive way she can find. In doing so, she is making all the pious and self-righteous very uncomfortable. But Jesus receives her offering for what it is, an expression of love and gratitude. And like with the psalmist, we don't know what her sins and iniquities were. We don't know what she did, though we might pontificate or surmise. We can't help it. We like a good 20/20 exposé. However, all we see is her raw outpouring of love and gratitude, and we get Jesus' summary: The one who has been forgiven much, loves much.

Is that why you come, breaking from our cultural rhythms of self-absorption and self-congratulations to offer God your praises and your gratitude for grace extended? Because it is the one who has been forgiven much that loves much. In fact, that is what much of our worship liturgy and our scriptures suggest. God has called us out of darkness and into the light. "I once was lost but now am found." "I was blind, but now I see." Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." At the heart of our scriptural tradition, at the heart of our worship, is the proclamation of God's grace and love poured out for us – grace and love that saves and redeems and restores.

"By awesome deeds you answer us with deliverance," the psalmist sings, "O God of our salvation; / you are the hope of all the ends of the earth / and of the farthest seas."

We have been focusing on the psalms for three weeks now. The first week was the psalm of disorientation, laments like Ps 42 that cry out to God for help, and that languish until God intervenes. Last week we focused on psalms of orientation, that proclaim God's view upon the world, a world of order, where God is in control no matter what it looks like from ground level. But this week, it is the psalm of reorientation that articulates praise that comes out of a season of distress.

In some psalms, that place of distress may come from sin or error, such as Psalm 65, or Psalm 51, which we sang from in our response – the psalm of David after his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of her husband. But for other psalms, such as Ps 42, the distress is not necessarily mistakes made but things that happen to the psalmist, or it may be the awareness of the psalmist's need or vulnerability. It may be distress of other sorts. I think of Hannah's vow to offer praise and to give her son Samuel in service to the temple that came out of her season of barrenness and

the accompanying shame and disgrace. I think of Job for whom a clear answer never came as to why he had to endure what he did. All we know for sure is his friends and comforters were misguided in their simplistic answers. For the man born blind in John 9, the teachers of the law want to ascribe sinfulness as the cause, asking if it was something the man did, or something his parents did.

In the Bible, there was a tendency to ascribe some sinful cause to any undesirable circumstance. But the distress is not simplistically explained. Sometimes the trouble is not a clear result of our own choices. But we find ourselves in places of need, crying out to God with questions and with pleas of help.

Now the key to the psalm of reorientation, is not that one just simply gets life back to normal, gets things back to the way they were. I was thirsty, now I'm not. I was sick, now I'm healed. I was in trouble for my choices, and now I'm not. It is not just about getting back to where you were, it is that some new perspective or change comes, some new voice of praise. For the man born blind whom Jesus heals, his response is not, "finally, I can see like I should have seen all along." No, it is "I once was blind, but now I see." For Hannah, it is a song of how God has seen her in her lowliness and granted her favor and honor. And Samuel's presence in the temple is an ongoing song of God's favor. For Job, he does not get a clear articulation of why. He only is overwhelmed with the creation God has made with all its unruly beauty. And, as the scholar Ellen Davis emphasizes, the change in Job is evidenced by his choice to have a family again. To invest in this world again. And this time he gives inheritances to his daughters along with his sons, and he names them frilly names of delight, like daisy and rosy.

You see the song of reorientation is a song that comes out of a transformation of some sort. We have come to see and become differently. We see something of ourselves and of God because of that travail, because of how God met us there. That distress became part of our own evolution, of our own transformation.

Our poem this morning recalls a vision of disruption. Simple and almost silly, the thong of her sandal breaks. But the result is the poet finds herself contemplating the things that were mindlessly assumed. Now she is asking, where was I going, and was it worth it? And would I keep going there if I were barefoot and had to walk over sharp stones? And If I wouldn't, is it worth going there at all? We sometimes go through life on autopilot until something disrupts us, and we find ourselves disoriented and reconsidering things. And in those moments of disruption, we are potentially reminded of our reliance on God's presence, power, and grace.

And so when God meets us in a moment of distress or when our ways of living rupture, we might, like the woman, or like the psalmist, emerge with a word of praise. It is not a statement of resentment or entitlement. In the song of reorientation, we don't come into this place proclaiming what God should have given us all along. No we come proclaiming God's grace, which is not built on merit. We proclaim God's gracious pouring out of forgiveness and grace and love. And we proclaim that through these difficulties, God is changing us and renewing us, and shaping us into his image.

That is the contrast between the woman at Jesus' feet and the dignified self-righteous in our gospel reading. They retreat into themselves, resistant to this scene and its emotion. They keep calling her a sinner so to differentiate her from them. But, Jesus lifts her up as an example, a woman transformed and motivated by forgiveness and grace, a reality the others seem resistant to. It is the brokenness that puts us in touch with God's grace, that might cause us to receive God's help and grace, that might make us freshly aware of its power. This is why we have a prayer of confession each week, that we might learn to see the brokenness and to call it out. For unless we see it, we may not get to the place of grace and gratitude.

Verses 6-13 of Psalm 65 proclaim God's order. These verses on their own may read like a hymn. God is the god of creation who stills the forces of chaos and who controls the violent waters, and who makes fresh waters flow out to the earth so that it produces fruit and flourishes. The dilemmas present in Psalm 42 are resolved here. God has controlled raging waters, and instead of a place of thirst, the earth is well watered and fruitful. It is a song of God's order. But it is a vision that comes out of difficulty, it is a renewed vision, a deepened vision. The psalmist sees now afresh having come through his season of being overwhelmed with iniquity, with disorder.

The psalm of reorientation not only proclaims our desire for God to intervene, forgive, help, and deliver in our moments of need, it is a confession. It is a confession of our need to be reborn. We need to see the world afresh, to be forgiven and redeemed, to be set on the right path, to be found when we have been lost, to gain compassion where we have been hardened, to leave our nets when we have just taken out a small business loan, to become the least when we have tried our whole lives to be the greatest.

Paul writes, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect."

Praise is due to you O Lord  
and to you shall vows be performed,

2 O you who answer prayer!

To you all flesh shall come.

3 When deeds of iniquity overwhelm us,  
you forgive our transgressions.

4 Happy are those whom you choose and bring near  
to live in your courts.

We shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house,  
your holy temple.

So to return to my opening question, what brings you here to worship each week? Is it that you, like the psalmist, have a song of praise? Or are you seeking the words and insight to see how God's grace is at work in your life? Or are you trying to name the brokenness still? And in a society where we seem prone to always be ready to say why we are right, and everyone else is wrong, we come here to see our own brokenness. Because in seeing our brokenness, we might also come to know God's grace and forgiveness and love. Because it is the one who has been helped much, who has been forgiven much, that loves much. And we desire to be people who love - who love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and our neighbors as ourselves.

## Psalm 65

### *Thanksgiving for Earth's Bounty*

To the leader. A Psalm of David. A Song.

- 1 Praise is due to you,  
O God, in Zion;  
and to you shall vows be performed,
- 2 O you who answer prayer!  
To you all flesh shall come.
- 3 When deeds of iniquity overwhelm us,  
you forgive our transgressions.
- 4 Happy are those whom you choose and bring near  
to live in your courts.  
We shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house,  
your holy temple.
- 5 By awesome deeds you answer us with deliverance,  
O God of our salvation;  
you are the hope of all the ends of the earth  
and of the farthest seas.
- 6 By your strength you established the mountains;  
you are girded with might.
- 7 You silence the roaring of the seas,  
the roaring of their waves,  
the tumult of the peoples.
- 8 Those who live at earth's farthest bounds are awed by your signs;  
you make the gateways of the morning and the evening shout for joy.
- 9 You visit the earth and water it,  
you greatly enrich it;  
the river of God is full of water;  
you provide the people with grain,  
for so you have prepared it.
- 10 You water its furrows abundantly,  
settling its ridges,  
softening it with showers,  
and blessing its growth.
- 11 You crown the year with your bounty;  
your wagon tracks overflow with richness.
- 12 The pastures of the wilderness overflow,  
the hills gird themselves with joy,

<sup>13</sup> the meadows clothe themselves with flocks,  
the valleys deck themselves with grain,  
they shout and sing together for joy.

## Luke 7

### *A Sinful Woman Forgiven*

<sup>36</sup> One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him, and he went into the Pharisee's house and took his place at the table. <sup>37</sup> And a woman in the city, who was a sinner, having learned that he was eating in the Pharisee's house, brought an alabaster jar of ointment. <sup>38</sup> She stood behind him at his feet, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment. <sup>39</sup> Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner." <sup>40</sup> Jesus spoke up and said to him, "Simon, I have something to say to you." "Teacher," he replied, "speak." <sup>41</sup> "A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. <sup>42</sup> When they could not pay, he canceled the debts for both of them. Now which of them will love him more?" <sup>43</sup> Simon answered, "I suppose the one for whom he canceled the greater debt." And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly." <sup>44</sup> Then turning toward the woman, he said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair. <sup>45</sup> You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not stopped kissing my feet. <sup>46</sup> You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. <sup>47</sup> Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little." <sup>48</sup> Then he said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." <sup>49</sup> But those who were at the table with him began to say among themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" <sup>50</sup> And he said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you; go in peace."