

A Psalm For A Season Of Sickness  
Psalm 116:1-19

One day this past week I phoned Ann Snipes, a member of our congregation, and, in the course of our conversation, she asked me how I was. I remember saying something like this: “Ann, I’m looking out my office window at the beautiful mountains nearby. The sun is shining brightly. The sky is Colorado blue. Everything is wonderful. If it wasn’t for the news, I might imagine that there’s nothing wrong in all the world...if it wasn’t for the news, that is.”

Ah, but there’s the rub. Every day the news continues to bombard us with tragic stories of COVID-19. Every day the death toll goes up a little more. Every day the political battle about reopening the economy increases in intensity, while earlier this week our governor announced a new policy – Safer-at-Home – which for most of us doesn’t appear to be much different than Stay-at-Home and wait it out.

So which reality best describes the world in which we live? Beautiful mountains, blue skies and sunshine, or COVID-19? Truth be told, it’s both. Life is now, and always has been, an amalgam of good and evil. Nearly 25 years ago, Pamela’s folks invited our son Aaron to go with them from southern Indiana to Florida for a wonderful vacation. He was 8 at the time and was excited to go. But then the reality of an 800-mile road trip set in somewhere in Kentucky and he began to grumble, as all kids do, about long hours cooped up in a car. “Are we there yet?” I imagine he asked with maddening repetition. And I imagine he grumbled about other things, too, such as the food, since he was a very picky eater as a child. In any event, his grandmother got tired of hearing his grumbling and began to respond to each complaint by saying simply, “Aaron, have to take the bitter with the sweet.” It’s a lesson that he remembers to this day.

Yes, life is an amalgam of good and evil, joy and sorrow, the bitter and the sweet. And I suppose the quality of our lives is determined by how we respond to both. The 116<sup>th</sup> Psalm records the Psalmist’s response to some very bitter circumstances. We’re not exactly sure what those circumstances were but it seems the Psalmist was on the verge of death due to some sickness or other danger. In verse 3 he says, “The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol – that shadowy abode of the dead – laid hold of me; I suffered distress and anguish.” In verse 6 he says he was brought low. In verse 8 he speaks of death, and tears, and stumbling. In verses 10-11 he confesses that he was “greatly afflicted,” and surrounded by liars. Clearly, it was a very bitter time for him. So how did he respond? Did he give into the bitterness and surrender to despair? Or did he choose a different course leading to different destination?

It seems the Psalmist responded to his circumstances with faith and faithfulness. He turned to God rather than God in the midst of his suffering and found God faithful to deliver. So, he begins his psalm with these words: “I love the Lord, because he has heard my voice and my supplications. Because he inclined his ear to me, therefore I will call on him as long as I live. The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me; I suffered distress and anguish. Then I called on the name of the Lord: ‘O Lord, I

pray, save my life!’ Gracious is the Lord, and righteous; our God is merciful. The Lord protects the simple; when I was brought low, he saved me. Return, O my soul, to your rest, for the Lord has dealt bountifully with me.” (Ps. 116:1-7)

In these words, we see the other, better, sweeter part of life’s amalgam. Here we read of God’s mercy and God’s grace – God’s protection and salvation. And we’re reminded that it is important to remember these sweeter things whenever we face and taste life’s bitter things. Having spent the morning – that morning I spoke with Ann Snipes – dealing with issues of COVID-19 and its impact on our church, I needed to look out my office window for awhile to see the beautiful mountains, the bright sunshine, and the Colorado blue sky so that I might remember there’s still a lot of sweetness in our world, though it’s mingled with the bitter for a time.

Well, after his opening words in verses 1-7, the Psalmist goes on in his psalm to further describe the amalgam of life – the admixture of bitter things with sweeter things. “For you have delivered my soul from death,” he writes, “my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling. (But) I walk before the Lord in the land of the living. I kept my faith, even when I said, ‘I am greatly afflicted.’” (Ps. 116:8-10) And then the Psalmist asks this all-important question: “What shall I return to the Lord for all his bounty to me?” (Ps. 116:12)

What shall I return to the Lord for all of his bounty to me? That seems to me to be the natural reaction of the faithful to the bounteous goodness of God. In other words, we naturally want to give something to God because he has given so very much to us. Clearly, whatever we give God cannot possibly repay him for all of his bounteous goodness. But never mind that, we still want to give him something, even though our gifts may be meager in comparison to his own.

We are, after all, like the little boy you’ve heard me speak of from time to time, who saw his father working in the garden under a blazing sun, so he went to the faucet, found a dirty glass on the countertop, filled it with warm water, and took it to his father to quench his father’s thirst. Now that “gift” was faulty in every respect except in its intention. After all, it was warm water in a dirty glass. But it was given in grateful love to a good father by a little boy who had received so much from his father’s hand that he had to give something back to the dad whom he worshiped and adored. Did it repay the father for all the bounteous goodness he had provided for his son? Not in any material measure. But his father received it with gladness because he looked through it to it’s loving and grateful intention. So, like that grateful son, the Psalmist said, “I love the Lord, because he has heard my voice and my supplication...(So) what shall I return to the Lord for all his bounty to me?” (Ps. 116:1, 12)

And what shall we return to the Lord for his bounteous goodness to us, even in these days of a bitter coronavirus? Perhaps we can give God the very same things given to him by the ancient Psalmist so many years ago. What were those things? Well the Psalmist answered his own question by saying: “What shall I return to the Lord for all his bounty to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord, I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people...O Lord, I am your servant; I am

your servant, the child of your serving girl...I will offer to you a thanksgiving sacrifice and call on the name of the Lord. I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people, in the courts of the house of the Lord...Praise the Lord!" (Ps. 116:12-14, 16-19) So what did the Psalmist give to God in response to God's goodness to him?

Well first, he promised to give God the gift of his worship. He said, "I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord." (Ps. 116:13) The cup of salvation was probably a cup of wine poured out or shared with others as part of a sacrificial offering. In other words, it was an act of worship. For Christians, the cup of salvation is the communion cup which represents the blood of Christ poured out for us and shared among us as we commune with one another and with him. In any event, the Psalmist gave God the gift of his worship and so should we.

Second, he promised to pay his solemn vows. He said, "I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people." (Ps. 116:14) His vows were probably material gifts that he promised to give God if God delivered him from his trouble. And we who have also experienced the bounteous goodness of God can do the same – we can pay our vows and fulfil our financial pledges.

Third, he promised to serve God in some tangible way. He said, "O Lord, I am your servant; I am your servant, the child of your serving girl." You see, he recognized that he was a servant of God and promised to continue in God's service because God had been so good to him. And all of us can express our appreciation to God by finding some way or ways to serve God with our time, our talents, our gifts, and our abilities.

Finally, he promised to live a grateful or a thankful life. And so, he said, "I will offer to you (O God) a thanksgiving sacrifice and call on the name of the Lord." Each of us needs to decide whether we will be like the grateful Psalmist or like my grumbling son – my 8-year-old son – who, despite the wonderful gift of a trip to Florida in the company of his loving grandparents, spent much of the journey complaining along the way. Yes, life is an amalgam of good and evil, joy and sorrow, sweet and sour. But we can choose where to fix our focus. And the quality of our lives will largely be determined by where we fix our gaze. Wouldn't we be better off to fix our focus on God's goodness and give the gift of grateful praise than to focus on the badness all about us and spend our days in grumbling and complaint? I think we would be, don't you?

Well friends, as I was writing this sermon, I received an email from UCHHealth that beautifully illustrated the meaning of this psalm. That email contained the story of Sergio Hernandez and his son, Rafael.<sup>1</sup> You see, on March 27, Sergio was taken to the emergency room at UCHHealth in Greely where he was diagnosed with the coronavirus.

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<sup>1</sup> JBS worker with COVID-19 goes home after son prayed outside hospital for days, by Katie Kerwin McCrimmon, UCHHealth, April 20th, 2020. Found at: [https://www.uchealth.org/today/jbs-worker-with-covid-19-goes-home-after-son-prayed-outside-hospital-for-days/?utm\\_source=UCHHealth%20Today&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=%20parking%20lot%20vigil%20and%20a%20tearful%20reunion](https://www.uchealth.org/today/jbs-worker-with-covid-19-goes-home-after-son-prayed-outside-hospital-for-days/?utm_source=UCHHealth%20Today&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=%20parking%20lot%20vigil%20and%20a%20tearful%20reunion). Current as of April 23, 2020.

On April 2 he was transferred to the Medical Center of the Rockies and put on a ventilator. All told, he was hospitalized for 16 days. And during that entire time, his son Rafael kept vigil in the parking lot beneath his father's window. "I'm here with you and I'll be with you until you get out!!" Rafael texted his father. "I'm not leaving. I LOVE YOU and need you in my life DAD!...I'm staying here till you get out." And he did; he spent all of that time in the parking lot in prayer, and worship, and remembrance! "He thought back to times when he was little and his dad taught him how to lift weights and work on cars. He remembered the excitement when his dad got him an Atari 2600. (And) as worries gnawed at him, music provided some comfort. A favorite was *Great are you Lord* by Casting Crowns." And so, he would listen to that music and worship and pray while looking up at his father's window.

Well finally, on April 11<sup>th</sup>, Rafael's prayers were answered when his father was discharged from the hospital. And as he left the hospital, Sergio said in a hushed voice, that he was "...looking forward to resting and (then) returning someday to his church so he (could) give thanks to God for his survival."

Doesn't that sound a lot like the Psalmist in this psalm? "I love the Lord, because he has heard my voice and my supplications. Because he inclined his ear to me, therefore I will call on him as long as I live. The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me; I suffered distress and anguish. Then I called on the name of the Lord: 'O Lord, I pray, save my life!' Gracious is the Lord, and righteous; our God is merciful. The Lord protects the simple; when I was brought low, he saved me. Return, O my soul, to your rest, for the Lord has dealt bountifully with me...What (then) shall I return to the Lord for all his bounty to me?" (Ps. 116:1-7)

What then shall we return to the Lord for all his bounty to us? My friends, in this season of sickness, when there's so much bad news in the world, let's remember the Lord's bounty is with us still. And in remembering that, let's give him the gift of our worship, let's remember to pay our vows, let's renew our commitment to serve him, and let's thank and praise him for his goodness both now and forevermore. Amen.