Gratitude in the Storm
Genesis; Psalm 103

In our second reading, we lift up Psalm 103, one of the most popular Psalms. It is regularly said at the beginning and the end of the day. It reminds us to cultivate gratitude as a regular part of our spiritual devotion. This is something you might tape to your bathroom mirror to remember to say as you brush your teeth every morning and evening. I read from Psalm 103. "Bless the Lord, bless the Lord, O my soul/And all that is within me/

Bless the Lord, O my soul/And forget not God's benefits

This week, I was flipping through the news about the Middle East. Netanyahu canceled a peace proposal and the news anchor zeroed in on Settler's in the West Bank who are shooting at their Palestinian neighbors in wanton fashion. What struck me was my first response, recognized by most every veteran of the Middle East. It is a deadening dread, distantly related to 'compassion fatigue', where you realize that you are going to have to manage how much of this very real negativity that you take in.

Once again, you feel yourself being pulled into this dysfunctional cycle of vengeance and retribution that leads to wanton violence which

leads to disgust for an enemy that you don't recognize as human or civilized like you, which allows for a wider vengeance and retribution that inflicts deeper trauma more broadly, triggering a swirling vortex of tragedy and cynicism towards your enemy, socially sanctioned now, so that collectively we all descend into this quicksand of moral and spiritual misery.

Ever since October 7th, we watched a nation of people flip a switch where fear, threat, anger, and death surround us. And when that trauma happens generation after generation, all kinds of deeper spiritual negativity, despair, pointlessness, and futility surface such that you actually expose your grandchildren to the toxic negativity in a way that will kill them, because you can't stop yourself from doing it. You never would do this as an individual, but we are all capable of tragic inhumanity when we act in groups, aren't we?

This is now becoming a monthly part of our life. Violence, stupidity, vengeance… and because our world is so interconnected now, it doesn't just stay in the Middle East. It stokes the fear, aggression, and stupidity

that swirl around us in our own country. How do you center yourself spiritually during this cyclone of spiritual negativity? Internally, we have to change the channel. We have to set our own spiritual direction, even more intentionally when we are surrounded by strife and conflict. We have to keep our own equanimity, purpose, and integrity. Outside strife cannot be allowed to hijack the steering wheel of our lives.

In the Bible, Psalm 103 is given to us as a guide. It is a little counterintuitive to invoke gratitude for God's blessing in the midst of social chaos. You don't feel like it. And that is the point. You know, people commonly refer to the Israelites as Jews, which you could roughly translate from the Hebrew as "The Grateful Ones."

The name derives from Jehuda, the fourth child born to Leah. Leah was married to Jacob, the grandson of Sarah and Abraham. When this child was born, Leah cried out loud, "Yehuda" in Hebrew, like so many mothers, which means "I am grateful." I am grateful to God. So we call the Israelites Jews, 'the grateful ones'.

There is a poignant irony to the fact that we call the Israelites the "Grateful Ones." When you consider their long history, they have spent more time in exile than in peaceful fulfillment. They have been subject to pogrom after pogrom, to the Holocaust.

And this is important to note because we do not get any guarantees in spiritual life that things will turn out well. They usually do not. And that is why there is much kvetching at God in the Hebrew scriptures, particularly in the Psalms. It is challenging to keep a positive mental attitude amid suffering, exile, and frustration. They question God about why they suffer, as Job did. Why is it that evil people around us prosper? The bastards… No, in Job, in many of the Psalms, we get the full range of emotion about suffering, injustice, and tragedy.

So, being "The grateful ones" isn't about how great your life has been, how easy or prosperous it has been. It is about remembering the sacred quality of life, even when you are in a concentration camp. It is about seeing the wonder of a rainbow, the beauty of a flower, even when you are deathly ill. It is about the unbridled joy that a grandmother feels

when she holds her grandchild for the first time, especially after a long season of waiting, a generation of frustration.

Even under the most miserable conditions, we are grateful for the wonder of existence that we have this expression of faith in Psalm 103.

Bless the Lord, O my soul

And all that is within me

Bless, the Lord, O my soul

And forget not God's benefits.

Who forgives your iniquity

And heals all your diseases.

Who redeems your life from the Pit

Who crowns you with steadfast mercy

Who satisfies you with good as long as you live

So that your youth is renewed like the eagle.

The perspective is looking back on your life, the goodness of it, in spite of some parts that were really negative.

That is certainly what people feel at the end of their lives. I've now sat with dozens of people at the end of their lives. Many times, I've asked them a simple question. Their health is failing. They know it. The end is near. They know it. Sometimes I'll ask, 'Are you ready to die? You have lived your life up to this point; you know the end is near. How is it with your soul?' I like that old language. "Tell me, what are you thinking and feeling right now?"

Invariably, they well up and take a long time to speak. Mostly, they don't say much because they've tapped into a complex stream of consciousness that is incredibly poignant. But eventually they say, "It's all been good." Or "I'm grateful for my people; grateful for my life." Really, they are grateful to have been born, and in that moment, with the end near, they are deeply grateful to be alive. Grateful, in the memorable phrase of Milan Kundera, for 'the unbearable lightness of being'.

Some of you may know that we have reports from people who have had near-death experiences, that they experienced a kind of saturated reel of the highlights of their life. We have many, many reports from people

who have had a heart attack and survived it, and some of them report that during that time when they were ‘between life and death ’, so to speak, they had their whole lives flash before them, one significant scene after another. And they invariably report that this ‘life review’ was accompanied by a vivid emotional impact. They remember how they felt then and how they feel now about that scene. This ‘life review’ is described as having a comprehensive feel overall, with a big-picture look at how you grew, changed, and evolved. But one interesting feature is that people regularly recall insignificant childhood events that had symbolic meaning for their development throughout life. A lot of the time, these events they barely notice, barely remember at the time, but in their ‘life review’ they can see how they were more significant for who they would become than they understood when they originally experienced them.

Quite unlike the Medieval depictions of judgment in the afterlife, where we face the judgment of God, people who have survived near-death experiences say that the life review they experienced was remarkably judgment-free, more of a reflection on the spiritual evolution of their

character, the impact they had on others, and how they were shaped for better and worse. But the perspective was more about learning, more self-acceptance than judgment, more about forgiveness, insight, and making meaningful connections like you might in therapy. It is about love, sprinkled with kindness. They take away a sense of significance about why they lived, what they meant to others, and what others meant to them. The point is, that when our lives are almost complete, what we are filled with… is gratitude.

I've wondered if our ideas about the afterlife come from this phenomenon that is pretty widely reported. Our ancestors attended to each other as they died. They heard people speak about this experience more often than we have in the past couple of generations, when people die in hospitals. I wonder if our ancestors took what little they heard reported and filled in the blanks with their fears, mostly, rather than their hopes, which is why we got so much judgment and fear of an angry God.

But perhaps the process of dying is not so fearful. People universally report that experience in terms of gratitude. They were grateful to have

been privileged to be part of the ride, grateful that they got to love, even more grateful that they were loved by other people.

It is an awe-filled wonder that we got to live at all. And, as we have wizened with age, we have a more honest appraisal of ourselves that comes to terms with who we actually became out of all the paths that might have been. That sense of judgment, of seeking resolution and significance, is positive.

Spiritually speaking, our lives are all about gratitude. Gratitude is the opening bow of the spiritual life, calling to mind the mystery and wonder of your life, remembering and savoring the moments that have been precious in your life, like a precious perfume you can invoke from time to time, like Leah. She had a very difficult life, but the day her child was born, she was overcome with how glad she was to live to hold that baby in her arms, so she named the child "Jehuda," which literally means something like 'God is good to me'.

Build that into your life, that sense of wonder in the face of love, that fundamental gratitude about your life, particularly at the beginning and the

end of the day. Point yourself towards your true North, spiritually speaking. Remember who you are, what you are about.

Invoke the spirit of gratitude with your family, with your spouse, your children, giving them a time and a place to name what they are grateful for; with your extended family, with your friends, reminding them realistically what you appreciate about them, what you respect about them, what gifts they have and why they need to develop those gifts. Bless them with gratitude like God would do.

When you do, it is easier to intentionally return to your center in the midst of social storms that surround us so regularly now because the storms keep coming back and back and back.

I saw a picture this summer of an archeological excavation right in the area near Gaza from 1500 BC. That is 3500 years ago: three walled cities right near each other, each with one way in, one way out. What surprised the archaeologists was that they were inhabited by totally distinct people- different languages, different ethnic origins, different religions.

They were surprised to discover that these three walled cities were enemies, living right next to each other, but really having hardly anything to do with each other, because they were separated by huge stone walls, and all their life took place inside of those walls with their own people, until they went to war, and then they would periodically burn each other down.

It was an aerial photo.

Then you go to Israel, and you see the modern development today- in Israel itself, in the West Bank, in Gaza, everywhere. An aerial photo of the present shows walled suburbs or planned communities, one way in, one way out, side by side with people who are completely distinct from them, with different languages, different ethnic origins, different religions. Enemies living right next door to each other, but really having nothing to do with one another because they live their lives inside those walls with their own people, except when they periodically…

What we are witnessing right now is at least as old as David and Goliath (Goliath came from Gaza). If you could zoom out, you would see

that we are witnessing trauma passed down generation after generation. That trauma needs to be addressed. But my point this morning is simply that these social problems are persistent, complex, not easily solved, and likely to impact us for quite some time.

The world we live in now is interconnected enough that we sense that strife far from our shores will change our social reality, probably for the worse, creating a background anxiety just beneath the surface every time we engage with the news. We sense the need to set the spiritual tone in our life, or else we will be subject to a maelstrom of negativity in our wider world.

You have to lead- your job, your family, your community. You have to invoke a spiritual positivity in the midst of a sea of strife in our wider world, bad news about our climate, your own insecurities and stubborn issues, health concerns, and petty crap that soils your week.

But you have a vital role to play. You are a positive presence in the midst of it all. Your people need you. Start your day by putting on your grateful, positive self. Give thanks, take charge, pilot your boat through

these choppy waters. Even when it is bad, it is still good. You are becoming stronger spiritually. You are figuring it out. You can do this, and you will be more profound for having evolved.

Peace, strength, and activated faith. As my grandfather used to say to me, “Don’t let the bastards wear you down.” Amen.