

**The Reverend Marjo Anderson**

**1-Narrative – Summer – Psalms – Week 4**  
**Psalm 40:1-10, Luke 11:11-32**

**7 July 2019**  
**Salem, Bridgeport**

**“Transformed”**

Today we conclude our four-week series on the psalms.

Over the past 3 weeks, we looked at a psalm of praise, a psalm of lament, and a psalm of trust;  
and today we look at a psalm of thanksgiving.

Theologian and preacher, Walter Brueggeman, says that together the psalms encompass  
the vast array of human emotion, through all the ups and downs of life.

He says that time and time again, we move through a pattern  
from orientation to disorientation to reorientation.

Author Aunt Lamont illustrates a similar pattern when she describes the basic prayers of humanity  
as Wow, Help, Thanks, and Amen.

The first week we talked about how our lives begin with Praise.

The first and greatest commandment is that we love God  
with ALL of our heart and soul and body and mind.

For worship to be pleasing to God it must involve more than part of our mind and part of our heart –  
we need to open up our souls to the Spirit,  
open our minds to transformation,  
open our hearts to actually feel the power of love,  
and use our bodies to express our joy,

whether it is by singing, clapping, dancing, or lifting our hands in praise – or at least by smiling.

I know that’s not how mainline protestants tend to worship,

which is why I believe mainline Protestant congregations are declining in worship attendance.

Praising God is about joy and if we’re not exuding joy then something is seriously wrong.

The second week we talked about what happens when we find ourselves in crisis,  
overwhelmed by despair, and feeling like there is no one to help – not even God.

We talked about the importance of speaking our pain to God so that we are not a “Self-Sufficient Sam”  
and then immediately claiming the promise of God so that we do not become a “Needy Ned”,  
stuck in an ever downward spiral of bottomless pain and need.

Last week we talked about trusting in the midst of a crisis,  
about those glimpses of God

that give us light in the midst of darkness, hope in the midst of despair, and faith in the midst of fear.

And today we we’re going to talk about the psalm of thanksgiving,  
the song that arises from our hearts when God has rescued us,  
when God has given us the victory,  
when God has restored us from death to life.

Now often we may find ourselves wondering why we have to go through

this “orientation to disorientation to reorientation” pattern, this “wow to help to thank you to amen” pattern.  
why we have to go through suffering and experience pain.

Last week we talked a little bit about how suffering is a result of God giving us free choice,

since it is free choice that allows us to make bad decisions that end up with suffering as a consequence.

So while this gift of free choice can lead to love and joy and amazing things,

it can also lead to the opposite: to brokenness and hurt and pain and grief and sorrow and despair.

But there are other reasons that we need to go through these crises.

First of all, if there were no crises, life would be pretty boring, wouldn't it?

We may think that's what we want. But is it really?

Every good book has drama.

Every piece of music contains unresolved chords that seek resolution.

Every good play involves conflict.

But it goes even deeper than that.

I chose the story of the prodigal son today to illustrate the point.

We have two sons.

The older one is like so many eldest siblings (me included)

who, surrounded by adults, learns to seek the approval of their parents and other adults.

For the most part they stay on the path that they're supposed to be on.

Second children often see their parents and their older siblings and decide that they want more.

They don't want what has been prescribed for them.

They don't want what has been dictated to them.

They don't want to follow someone else's plan for their lives.

They want to experience life in all of its fullness.

They want to risk it all.

They want to learn for themselves.

And so we have the younger son telling his father,

"This is not what I want. I want more, to have it all. I want to do it better, do it my way.

And I don't want to wait. I want it now."

And so the father gives him his inheritance ahead of time

and the son goes out and lives it up, spends his money, entertains his friends, enjoys women,  
and has a grand old time.

Everything is great until the money runs out – and the friends disappear and the women vanish  
and he can no longer afford a roof over his head or food for his stomach.

He ends up in the lowest job there is – feeding pigs, unclean animals.

He not only is feeding them, but has to sleep with them and eat with them.

And then one day he realizes that even the lowest servant on his father's farm has it better than he does.

And he returns home, hoping against hope

that his father will at least allow him to work in the lowest position.

His father sees him coming, runs to meet him, embraces him,

and throws him probably the biggest party he's ever given.

And that's where we find the difference between orientation and re-orientation,  
the difference between the praise at the beginning and the thanksgiving at the end,  
the difference between the initial wow and the final amen.

The older brother who has always done what he was supposed to do,

ends up being a judgmental, arrogant, self-righteous, self-centered, selfish snob.

He sees himself as deserving because of what he has done

and he looks at his younger brother and sees someone who is NOT deserving,

someone who was stupid, who made the wrong choice, who didn't work hard enough,

and therefore should be punished, suffer the consequences, and be forever in an inferior position.

The father explains it's not about what you did and it's not about what he did.

It has nothing to do with how good you are, or how obedient you are,

or how hard you try to please me.

I love you both equally.

We don't hear the younger brother's response, but from what Jesus said at another time we can imagine it.

"Whoever has been forgiven little, loves little; whoever has been forgiven much, loves much."

One of the reasons God has designed this world the way God designed it,  
one of the reasons God has given us free will,  
one of the reasons God allows us to make mistakes and to sin,  
is so that we can learn from our experience.

And by that I mean not only learn not to do it again (although that's usually a helpful lesson)  
but learn about forgiveness and love and generosity of spirit,  
learn about God's mercy, God's love, and God's grace.

When we've been at the bottom – especially when it's because of what we have done –  
and when we take responsibility for our actions,  
and when we are blown away by God's forgiveness and love,  
it enlarges our hearts.

And unlike the older brother who responds from a position of superiority and power and privilege,  
we who have been to hell and back like the younger brother  
can identify with the person who has taken a path different from us and has ended up in pain.  
and we can empathize with them  
and see them as a person equal to us in God's eyes.  
We can see in the other who seems to be in need,  
that not only can we fill their need, but they can fill ours.

When we been to the bottom, when we been in the pit, when we have been at our lowest point  
and God has lifted us up and restored us and healed us and made us whole,  
when God has forgiven us and has had mercy on us, and has blessed us with grace,  
then we can respond not only with a more specific and particular thanksgiving,  
but with a deeper level of thanksgiving than we could have in the beginning  
and we can bring more honor to God and we can share more love with God's people.

Yes, the younger brother chose a different path than his older brother –  
a path that to the older brother seemed like the wrong path.  
But in the long run perhaps it was the younger brother who chose more wisely.

The hardest battles provide the greatest victories.  
The greater the brokenness, the more miraculous the healing will be.  
The greater the sin, the more meaningful the mercy.  
The greater the pain, the deeper the joy.

As we move from orientation to disorientation to reorientation,  
as we move from wow to help to thanks to amen,  
as we move from happiness to despair to hope to thanksgiving,  
we find that we end up not where we started, but in a place that is higher and deeper and wider.

And so today we give thanks for the crises in our lives –  
for the brokenness and pain and fear and doubt and loneliness and despair –  
for all the heartaches of our lives  
because through it all God is with us, mending us and healing us and restoring us.

Through the changes and chances and challenges of life, God is at work,  
transforming us into something more, something wiser, something better than we were before.

May God work through the crises of your life to transform it,  
showering you with grace and filling you with love so that you overflow with joy. **Amen**