

Pilgrims from Four Directions – Psalm 107 – FMC – Nov. 2, 2008

Imagine yourself walking toward Jerusalem.

A great feast day is approaching,
and you are part of a large group of pilgrims moving toward
that holy city to celebrate and offer prayers of thanks to God.

You are coming from the north;

others are coming from the south, east, and west.

People from every direction are gathering to praise God, their deliverer.

Each person has had trouble and distress,
and each has been delivered.

Though the details differ from person to person, they share the same story.
And as they converge in Jerusalem and climb the temple steps,
they take turns telling their stories—stories about how God
rescued them from trouble.

That's Psalm 107, the first 32 verses. Vss. 33-43 were added later.

We are going to re-enact the telling of those pilgrims' stories this morning.
First, we will hear the Psalm text itself, then I will talk about that section,
and then we will sing that section, using the insert in your bulletin.

If we had a really large congregation I'd split you into 4 parts:
north, east, south and west, to make it more realistic.

But instead I'll ask all of you to sing all the stanzas.

The specific words are from the old Presbyterian Psalter Hymnal,
and it works perfectly with the tune: "For the beauty of the earth."

Let us begin. [vss. 1-3]

Like those pilgrims gathering at the temple so long ago,
we have also experienced the touch of God.

We have all known, in large and small ways,
what it is like to be unable to save ourselves.

We have all needed a Power greater than our own to touch and heal us.

V. 2 says that the redeemed of the Lord ought to SAY so;
that's why we're here this morning:

the Lord has delivered us, and we want to say so.
That's what praise is; that's what worship is.

We're here to say that God's love is steadfast; it never ceases.

[Sing stanzas 1-2] { **See full 107 singing text at end of message** }

And now the first group of pilgrims, those from the north, tell their story.
[read 4-9]

The original Israelites spent many decades wandering in desert wastes,
finding no home, no place to put down their roots.
They were hungry and thirsty, often lost and afraid in the desert wastes.

A wilderness can be experienced literally,
and it can also be a symbol of inner emptiness, discouragement,
depression.
We've all had those desert times, those alone times,
those times of looking across the sand dunes of life as far as you
can see and seeing only more of nothing,
a time of chasing mirages that disappear when you get close.

Every human being is looking for a home, a place to belong.
Sometimes, even in the midst of other people, we feel that we walk alone.

But the testimony of these pilgrims is that they cried to the Lord
in their trouble, and the Lord delivered them.
God led the people by a straight way.
It doesn't say the way was short, but it does say that God knows
the way out of the desert.

[sing stanzas 3-5]

And now, the second group of pilgrims, coming from the west,
tells their story.
[vss. 10-16]

Israel spent 400 years as slaves.
Later they often experienced subjection to foreign powers.

The words in this section remind us of Isaiah 61—the passage quoted by Jesus in his first sermon:

“The Lord has anointed me to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and the opening of the prison to those who are bound.”

God delivers prisoners from whatever binds them.

We can be prisoners of habits that enslave,
prisoners of the secrets we keep,
prisoners of our possessions,
prisoners of grudges and prejudices,
prisoners of the forgiveness we refuse to grant.

The Good News here is that it is not your destiny to wear chains.
God delivers.

[sing stanzas 6-8]

And now, the third group of pilgrims, those coming from the north,
tells their story.

[read vss. 17-22]

This is one of the biblical passages that makes a connection between our
sin and our physical afflictions.

Other Scripture passages—and Jesus himself on the occasion of healing
the man born blind—argue that there is NOT such a connection.

On this subject, the Bible is in dialogue with itself.

In either case, we have here a suffering person—
suffering so great that even food was unattractive.

Things were so bad that death seemed near.

We all know what it means to be sick—whether it's partly our own fault
or not.

Some of us know what it means to sense that the gates of death
are drawing near.

It is appropriate in such a situation to cry to the Lord in your trouble,
to ask for deliverance from your distress.

God WILL deliver; and that's a fact.

But don't let the fact that everyone eventually dies lead you to discount the message of these pilgrims.

Think first of the fact that for every sickness or infirmity from which you have recovered, it is God who healed you, God who delivered you.

Sometimes God works through the hands of medical personnel and sophisticated drugs.
And sometimes God works in ways beyond the knowledge of science.

Be clear on this point: Of all the infirmities from which you have been healed, God gets the credit in every case.

God heals every sickness—except the last one, of course.

And even THAT is deliverance for the Christian,
for we are then freed from all bondage to decay that we know so well here on this earth.

So for all the healings we have experienced
and for all the healings—in whatever form—that we WILL experience,
we thank God, our healer, our deliverer.

[Sing stanzas 9-11]

And finally, the last group of pilgrims, the ones coming from the south,
tell their story.

[Read vss. 23-32]

In the mind of the Israelites, the sea represented powerful, uncontrollable forces. The sea is always a symbol of chaos, of evil and danger.

To go down to the sea in ships to do business on the great waters was extremely risky. That has always been true.

You can build the best boat in the world—like the Titanic—
and have all the skills necessary to control the boat,
but sometimes forces outside of your control blow you where
you don't want to go.

Sometimes forces more powerful than you are take over and you are
helpless to do anything about it,
and are simply forced to try to ride it out.

Your hope is reduced to the minimum: survival.

Here in Nebraska we don't go down to the sea in ships to do business
very often.

But we could paraphrase this passage for farmers:

“Some went out in the field in tractors,
doing business on the good earth.

But the interest rates rose up and devoured all the profits.
The price of machinery went up, the price of corn went down,
the value of land plummeted,
debts mounted up to the heavens,
and their spirits fell to the depths of despair.

No matter how hard they worked to make a go of it,
forces beyond their control beat them down.”

This is not just a lament about economics.

Sometimes the forces beyond your control are the choices and behavior
of those you love.

Sometimes it's an accident or an illness.

Sometimes it's war or injustice or the unintended bad consequences of
a law that was meant for good.

Again, the Good News is that God delivers.

For some, the Lord's deliverance will include the emotional and spiritual
strength to make it through the storm until times get better—
or to survive as a person even if they don't get better.

For some, the Lord's deliverance will include new forms of community
sharing and mutual support.

For some, the Lord's deliverance may include God's guiding you to the right choice or the right new idea to get things back on track.

For some, the Lord's deliverance will mean the ability to hang onto your faith in God—and even GROW in faith—
even though everything seems to be falling apart—
and even if they DO fall apart.

And for others, the Lord's deliverance may mean leaving the ship you're on and getting on another ship,
secure in the knowledge that God will never abandon you,
and that there can be life after fishing—as Peter discovered—
or life after farming—
or life after anything.

Deliverance, you see, does not always mean fixing what is;
it can also mean going in a new direction.

God can deliver you IN your situation,
or God can deliver you OUT of your situation.

God can use the economic and political storms to find the ship
that can best take us to the haven he has prepared for us;
and sometimes that's a different ship than the one we expected.

And again, those who have experienced the deliverance of the Lord
find it only natural to come together in worship to praise the Lord
for steadfast love, for salvation, for deliverance.

[Sing stanzas 12-15]

We all have something in common this morning:
we have all experienced God's deliverance in some way,
and we all still need God's deliverance in some way.
None of us is totally healthy, totally without bonds which enslave us,
always sailing on calm seas.

But we have each other, and we have God.
Psalm 107 is your invitation to cry to the Lord in your distress.
God WILL deliver.

Psalm 107
Sing to the tune of “For the Beauty of the Earth”

Introduction

1. Praise the Lord, for he is good. For his mercies ever sure from eternity have stood, to eternity endure. Let his ransomed people raise songs to their redeemer's praise.
2. From captivity released, from the south and from the north, from the west and from the east, in his love he brought them forth, ransomed out of every land from the adversary's hand.

Pilgrims from the East

3. Wand'ring in the wilderness, far they roamed the desert way, found no settled dwelling place where in peace secure to stay, til with thirst and hunger pressed courage sank within their breast.
4. To Jehovah then they cried in their trouble, and he saved: he himself became their guide, led them to the rest they craved by a pathway straight and sure, to a city strong, secure.
5. Sons of men, awake to praise God the Lord who reigns above; gracious in his works and ways, wondrous in redeeming love; longing souls he satisfies, hungry hearts with good supplies.

Pilgrims from the West

6. Rebels who had dared to show proud contempt of God Most High bound in iron and in woe, shades of death and darkness nigh, humbled low with toil and pain, fell and looked for help in vain.
7. To Jehovah then they cried in their trouble, and he saved, threw the prison open wide where thy lay to death enslaved, bade the gloomy shadows flee, broke their bonds and set them free.
8. Sons of men, awake to praise God the Lord who reigns above Gracious in his works and ways, wondrous in redeeming love; iron bars he breaks like clay, and the brazen gates give way.

Pilgrims from the North

9. Those who walk in folly's way, and to evil turn aside, find that sorrow will repay those who wisdom's laws defied; down to death's dark portals led, they abhor their daily bread.
10. To Jehovah then they cry in their trouble, and he saves, sends compassionate reply, gives the health their spirit craves, rescues them with gracious aid from the snares their folly laid.
11. Sons of men, awake to praise God the Lord who reigns above; Gracious in his works and ways, wondrous in redeeming love; let them all thank-off'rings bring, celebrate his deeds, and sing.

Pilgrims from the South

12. They that traffic on the sea, while unceasing watch they keep see Jehovah's majesty and his wonders in the deep; for he bids the stormwind fly, lifting ocean's waves on high.
13. By the billows heav'nward tossed, down to dreadful depths again, troubled much, their courage lost, reeling, they like drunken men, find their skill and power o'erthrown; none can save but God alone.
14. To Jehovah then they cry in their trouble, and he saves, drives the darkness from the sky, calms the storm and stills the waves, makes their sad forebodings cease, to their haven guides in peace.
15. Sons of men, awake to praise God the Lord who reigns above, Gracious in his works and ways, wondrous in redeeming love; praise him where the people meet, praise him in the elders' seat.

(Text from **The Psalter Hymnal**,

United Presbyterian Board of Publication.)