

Many of you were here last Sunday, and you heard Dan Griset's excellent sermon. It reminded me of the time I preached and afterward someone told me, on the way out, "That was a great sermon: invigorating, refreshing, inspiring." About the time I was ready to say, "All the credit goes to God" he didn't say "It wasn't *that* good"... he said, "it was so good, I felt like a new man...when I finally woke up."

It also reminded me of two of the many things for which I'm grateful about you all, this church: 1) While I was 4 Sundays away, you heard 4 sermons from 4 different people—4 very effective sermons. (Thank you: Jan Shea, Chuck Hoover, Susan Golian, Dan Griset)—and many more of you willing and able to do likewise: what a terrific asset in a church—to have such people of maturity, ability, willingness to say "Yes" to God in this specific way. 2) I'm grateful for many of you, our core nucleus of regular worshippers—here Sunday after Sunday to worship God. If you're within 30 miles, you're here, worshipping God, and enthusiastic about it—because you wouldn't want to be anywhere else.

You can see I'm back in town, glad to be back with you, ready to go. (Some of you know: we Fishers were in Florida to visit Trish's 87-year old father who was eager to meet his grandchildren and see re-establish a bond with our family. We're glad we visited him; he's doing very good work to take care of his wife and he's doing well.

While there we drove across "Alligator Alley" to see Jeanette Ripp Moran and Doug—they were wonderfully hospitable to us and they're fine. I think she misses many of you—was she glad to see some church friends around! I think it's been hard for her to have moved away from you—you all make it difficult to do that! It was great for us to see them.

We then drove on up to see old friends in North Carolina—it was a wonderful reunion time. (There was one odd highlight—*déjà vu* for the first time—as we all got up one day in the dark at 5:00 am—to drive 60 miles to Greensboro for Matt to play in a clay court tennis tournament Trish found online. Matt enjoyed the experience; he won his first two matches and we all got back at 11:00 that night. (It helped me to appreciate how much my parents sacrificed for my competitive tennis.)

Now we're back, getting into "back to school mode"—attending registration/orientation at the high school, getting class schedules, all the new school clothes bought, Katie and Matt getting summer homework assignments completed before next Tuesday.

Many of you have children; you know what it's like to "shift gears;" some of you, also, got away for a summer vacation; you, too, may be preparing for this new season after Labor Day.

Maybe this is a good time, this transition weekend, for all of us to take stock.

--How is it with you?

--How is it between you and God?

--How do you know?

--Are you satisfied with your spiritual life, and with all the other aspects of your life which then follow?

Many would never make the following connection—but Psalm 116 reminds us of an excellent metric, an excellent barometer for measuring spiritual health: Do you worship

God regularly with your faith family, with excitement and heartfelt passion? Do you love to be here, worshiping God, totally putting yourself into it, on Sunday a.m.?

(I don't suppose I've ever had someone call to say, "Chip, we'd like to make an appointment with you. Our marriage is doing fine, our kids are fine, our careers are going fine—but we're very concerned about the fact that we are indifferent, uncommitted, and irregular about worshiping God. It bothers us a lot because we know worship is a telltale key to a lot of other important things!" (No one's ever made that appointment with me—but this concern would be a wise basis for doing so.)

Psalm 116 tells us why.

In order to make my point, let me take liberties with a story from the Hindu tradition, and identify this psalmist (author of Ps 116) with the guru who trained disciples on and in the Ganges River, sacred to many Hindus.) A new recruit approached him in the river: "I want you to teach me how I may experience Enlightenment." The recruit didn't seem terribly insistent or urgent about it—and before he knew it the little guru had backflipped him into the river, and held his head underwater for what seemed to the recruit like an eternity! He couldn't breathe! He panicked—why was this guru going to drown him? Finally, finally, as he was blacking out and growing weak, the guru brought him up for the most welcome breath he'd ever taken. "When you are ready to experience Enlightenment the way you were ready to take that breath of air, then come back and talk to me about it."

It's as if the Psalmist is saying, "You may be showing up to worship—but you aren't worshiping God until you are worshiping God as you are drawing your next breath." Of course I don't know how it is with you—what I do know is that you are the ones here on this holiday Sunday a.m.—bless you—I hope you're as glad to be here worshiping as I am—and that all of us are as glad to be here as God is about it!

Are you OK with your excitement level? (Do the words "worship" and "excitement" used together seem a *non sequitur* to you? It's not a question of worshiping with drums or heavy metal or organ; not a question of jumping up and down or sitting still, of caloric expenditure—it's a question of vitality, of focus, of expectancy, of desire, unquenchable hunger, of heart commitment...) Are you maybe going thru a dry patch when it comes to experiencing God and worshiping God from your heart?

One of the things Ps 116 explains for us so nicely is where the passion to worship God comes from. This Psalmist worships God as a grateful response to who God is and what God has done. Not because "[he] believes in God, the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord..." or because God is omnipresent and omniscient and omnipotent and His manifest divine attributes are worthy of our highest praise and worship..." These observations may be true enough, and important—but they are far from the heart of the Psalmist: (Hear his sentiments again: "I love the LORD *because He has heard my voice and answered my desperate prayers... when I was brought low He saved me!*" (That is, he loves and worships God because he knows God has saved his [backside] over and over again in times past.)

This may not be a very theological-sounding reason for loving and worshiping God—like a little child on Christmas morning who exclaims "Mommy, these presents are so wonderful and I love you so-o-o-o much!" But I can *trust* someone who loves God because he is grateful for all God has done for him. You can *trust* someone who loves

God because she has known God to rescue her from all sorts of predicaments over the whole span of a lifetime.

Our awareness of God's saving actions in the past call forth our grateful response in the present. The Psalmist's pleasure in public worship is his heartfelt response to the many ways he acknowledges God has delivered him in the past.

(The psalmist is not very specific in naming the troubles from which God has delivered him: We hear about "the snares of cords of death" which were binding him; we hear also of God, once the psalmist called out to Him, having "protected" him; of God having "saved him" when he had been "brought low," we hear of God having "dealt bountifully" with his soul. (The psalmist says also God "has delivered his soul from death, his eyes from tears, his feet from stumbling.")

[Now Christian and Jews know GOD not as a concept, but as the One who acts within history: as Creator, as the One who called Abraham and Sarah; as the One who set free the Israelites from bondage in Egypt, and who longs to set each person free from bondage of every kind; the One who initiated the covenant on Sinai, who sent the prophets to call the people back into obedience;

We Christian know God as the One who has come to us, in the fullness of time, in JX the Son—"God was in X reconciling the world to Himself—" and calling each of us also to be courageous reconcilers and peacemakers, in His image, in this broken world.

All this is true—but the Psalmist is much more immediately concerned: he escaped his enemies last week to live to worship another day; he was set free from some overwhelming fear (we don't know exactly—but it was *personal* not historical!) We don't know what cords were entangling him, what bitter tears his eyes were crying, what wrong steps his feet had been taking.

But I'll bet you know all about your near misses, about how God in His mercy has done for you what you could never have done for your self.

--Some have had vivid "near death experiences" or supernatural visions of the risen Christ when the monitors had gone flat at Hoag Hospital or in other moments of extremity.

--Some people have experienced the intervening hand of God setting them free from addictive substance abuse, from unshakable character flaws or habits.

--Some have been released from hopelessness, from the smothering black cloud of depression, from the recklessness and shame of a season of having "run wild.

--Some have been freed from shyness or fears;

--some from the frustrations of medical problems or prescriptions the doctors can't seem to balance just right, from the trauma of having lost a beloved spouse or endured a divorce.

--Mothers have been brought safely thru the perils of pregnancy and childbirth.

--Some give thanks to God for more mundane types of rescue, such as maturity and courage to accept and then flourish in difficult circumstances which are not improving (such as passing exams with confidence and moving ahead professionally.)

Whatever your own specifics, I expect each one of you knows, with the Psalmist, what it's like to have been delivered by God from suffering "distress and anguish," from

the effects of bitter tears of sadness and loss, from the hurt of “having been brought low” or having brought yourself low. What it’s like to have “called upon the name of the LORD” in your bondage and been set free; what it’s like to have had your “soul delivered from death.” I expect this is the basis behind your eager and authentic worship—Sunday after Sunday, year after year.

This psalm shows us the other side of the worship coin, also. If worshiping God on Sunday morning is *not* a bedrock commitment to me, *not* fundamentally important to me, not engaging me; if it’s hit or miss, if I feel I’m only going thru the motions, or worshiping out of obligation, or in the habit of slipping in five or ten minutes late, then this Psalm 116 tells me exactly what’s going on and why.

Here’s the logic of the Psalm: “I love and worship the LORD because He has heard my voice; because He saved me when I was brought low.” [vv 1, 6, 13ff] (That is, my desire to worship God today is my grateful response to what God has done to deliver me in the past...) This means if committed, passionate worship is eluding me, then it *must be* that I am not sufficiently aware of how God has rescued me, saved me. It may be that I question the existence of God, or the nature or goodness or mercy or power or ability of God to save me; or it may be simply that I am not doing very well at acknowledging the role of God in my having arrived safely at this point in my life this morning. [Do you follow? If I do not long to regularly worship God the way I long to draw my next breath, then *either* I don’t acknowledge who God is *or* I don’t acknowledge what God has done for me. That’s the gist of the logic of this psalm.]

Does this logic ring true in your experience? Does the pattern of your life mirror that of the Psalmist?

I clearly remember back to when I was probably about 16 years old. Some of you may also remember part of the wider Church’s traditional Communion liturgy. (My memory of this wording was refreshed during the Funeral Mass for my mom six weeks ago.) Dating back, I’m guessing, to the 4th Century, this responsive participation goes something like this:

“We lift up our hearts.”

“We lift them up to the Lord.”

“It is right and just to give Him thanks and praise, always and everywhere...”

And you know what? In the arrogance of my 16 years I had a problem with reciting that. Who were they to tell me what to say to God? Why should I allow myself to be manipulated along with the unthinking herd? I can remember holding back, picking and choosing, not at all sure I was eager to give God thanks and praise.

I don’t need to tell you that I had little awareness of God having heard my prayer, of God having saved me, of God having guided my footsteps. I was 16, I was competent, I was a hard worker, I deserved all that I had achieved. It was all about me. Who needed to worship God?

Fast forward about 10 years...during that span I suffered the painful but inexorable consequences of such pride and self-absorption playing out to their sad and self-destructive conclusions. Despite my best efforts to put Humpty back together again, to make myself whole, to loosen the bonds which held me fast, there came a time I had to admit I had failed; my way could not work, and I did not know how not to fail. In increasing desperation “I called on the name of the LORD: ‘O LORD, I pray, save my life.’”

God is faithful to save; God did begin the process of putting me back together, of doing for me what I could not do for myself. I don't have to tell you what worship was like for me in those days, once I had become aware of who God is and how God had loosened my bonds. I was so eager: all week I couldn't wait for Sunday morning to come. The hymns and the music thrilled me. Many of those sermons others thought mediocre came alive in me when I heard them; the Holy Spirit drove them home, deep, and gave them wings, within me. To worship God "in the presence of all His people" became a great joy. (As long as I don't get too preoccupied with being the preacher, to worship God with so many of you here also remains an abiding joy for me.)

How is it with you? Are you just crazy about worshiping God each Sunday? Or is there room for improvement—are you maybe in the summer worship doldrums, or just beginning to get the hang of heartfelt worship—are you ready for greater engagement, greater connection with God?

If there's room for improvement, I suggest you make a list—not just of your blessings, but make a list of your rescues.

--How and when has God rescued you?

--How and when has God delivered your soul, your eyes, your feet?

--How and when has God loosed the bonds you could never loosen for yourself?

--How and when has God heard your prayer, saved your life?

Our awareness of God's saving actions in the past call forth our grateful response in the present. As we consider who God is and what God has done, it's only natural that we should ask, along with the Psalmist [verse 12]: "What shall I give back to the LORD"? Or "How can I repay the God who has heard my prayer and saved my life?" And it's only natural that we should respond as he responds: I repay the God who has repeatedly rescued me... 1) by freely, enthusiastically gathering to worship God "in the presence of all God's people"—I and each of us goes public with our thanks and praise to God, and 2) by rededicating myself and my life, this Sunday and every Sunday, back into service and allegiance to my Lord: "O LORD, I am your willing and obedient servant, Your slave, for You have loosed my bonds." [v 16] Along with the Psalmist, we acknowledge all over again that we belong fully, and freely, to God: the God who has given us life; the God who who has set us free and delivered us from every danger and even from death.

"Praise the LORD!"

Psalm 116

116:1 I love the LORD, because he has heard my voice and my supplications.

2 Because he inclined his ear to me, therefore I will call on him as long as I live.

3 The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me; I suffered distress and anguish.

4 Then I called on the name of the LORD: "O LORD, I pray, save my life!"

5 Gracious is the LORD, and righteous; our God is merciful.

6 The LORD protects the simple; when I was brought low, he saved me.

7 Return, O my soul, to your rest, for the LORD has dealt bountifully with you.

8 For you have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling.

9 I walk before the LORD in the land of the living.

10 I kept my faith, even when I said, "I am greatly afflicted";
11 I said in my consternation, "Everyone is a liar."
12 What shall I return to the LORD for all his bounty to me?
13 I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD,
14 I will pay my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people.
15 Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his faithful ones.
16 O LORD, I am your servant; I am your servant, the child of your serving girl. You
have loosed my bonds.
17 I will offer to you a thanksgiving sacrifice and call on the name of the LORD.
18 I will pay my vows to the LORD in the presence of all his people,
19 in the courts of the house of the LORD, in your midst, O Jerusalem. Praise the
LORD!