

**July 5, 2009
Pentecost 5
Liberty Sunday**

"God Has Blessed America"

PSALM 103:1-4

Praise the LORD, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. ²
Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits-- ³ who forgives
all your sins and heals all your diseases, ⁴ who redeems your life from the pit and
crowns you with love and compassion.

I grew up hearing stories from my parents about how hard it was during the Great Depression. My mom went barefoot in the summer so she would not wear out the shoes she planned to wear to school that fall. Christmas gifts were a stocking stuffed with a small toy, an orange, and a few pieces of candy. My dad told us stories of men jumping off the freight trains when they slowed down near the town, and walking up to the farm house asking for food. My grandmother made them sandwiches and offered them coffee to drink.

Today we are going through a major recession. Some are calling it the Great Recession. We personally know people who are unemployed or underemployed, struggling to make ends meet. We see empty homes in our neighborhoods where there have been foreclosures. Retirement accounts have taken a huge hit. Hardly a day passes without hearing about the woes of the California economy and the budget mess in Sacramento.

In spite of all this bad news, we sometimes forget the good news of how richly blessed we are to live in this land of America. Yesterday we saw the fireworks lighting up the sky celebrating the birthday of our country. We want to use these words from Psalm 103 to light up our lives and remind ourselves how richly the Lord has blessed our country, and what a privilege it is to be living in this great land.

Blessed with benefits

Psalm 103 begins with these words, "Praise the LORD, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits." The word for "Praise" or "Bless" is the Hebrew word, "Baruch." It contains the thought of bowing down on bended knee to acknowledge someone and show them respect. We bow down before our God in awe and amazement as we look at the benefits or blessings he has poured out to our country in rich abundance.

We are living in a land of vast natural resources. There are reserves of oil and coal, farm lands that produce abundant crops, oceans and rivers and lakes, vast forests including the redwoods of California. What the Lord said about the Promised Land in Deuteronomy can also be said our country with its vast wealth and resources. "When the LORD your God brings you into the land he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to give you-- a land with large, flourishing cities you did not build, houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide, wells you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves you did not plant-- then when you eat and are satisfied, be careful that you do not forget the

LORD, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. It was Abraham Lincoln who once wrote: "We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of heaven; we have been preserved these many years in peace and prosperity; we have grown in numbers, wealth and power as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us." Along with the blessings of prosperity comes the responsibility of not forgetting the Lord.

In addition to vast resources, we are blessed to live in a land of freedom. Good government is also a gift to us from our heavenly Father. We are free to worship this morning without fear of being arrested for our beliefs. We have the freedom to walk our streets without fear of being mugged and robbed. Soldiers are fighting in places like Iraq and Afghanistan to protect us from further attacks against our land similar to what happened on September 11. Work is getting down. Contracts are being completed. Newspapers are delivered. Planes arrive safely. The garbage trucks pick up the garbage. The light switches deliver electricity. Grocery stores bring in fresh food. All of these are blessings we enjoy from the hand of our bountiful heavenly Father. "Praise the Lord o my soul and forget not all his benefits!"

Blessed with the forgiveness of sins through Jesus

The land of America is a good land because it is a place on this earth where people can still find what they need most in life, the forgiveness of their sins. The Psalmist says of the Lord that he "forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases." The greatest need that people have is not better jobs, or better health care, or better relationships with other people. What people need most is the forgiveness of all their sins. God has provided that gift for us through Jesus his Son. The land of America is a place filled with Christian churches where people can still find this message about forgiveness and peace with God. It is a land where people can access the Bible and read on their own the words of 1 John 1, "The blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin."

What if you were living in a Muslim country? In a Muslim country the mosques offer forgiveness of sins to people who show they are worthy by praying five times a day, fasting on the month of Ramadan, and showing acts of kindness and mercy. In American I can still find Christian churches that tell me that the debt of my sin is so large, I cannot begin to do anything to forgive even a small part of that debt. In the Christian churches we learn how "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." In our land there are still churches that have crosses on them to remind people of the tremendous sacrifice Jesus made to cancel the debt of sin completely. We may have a huge national debt, but the good news is that our personal debt of sin has been removed completely by Jesus.

In this beloved land of America people die every day just as they do in other countries of the world. Because the message of the gospel is being proclaimed in this land, people are dying in the arms of Jesus their Shepherd. They face their last hours of life on this earth hearing loved ones join them in the words of the 23rd Psalm, "The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want..."

Blessed with redemption from the pit

Another blessing that comes to people living in this land is what the psalmist calls "redemption from the pit." He praises the Lord "who redeems your life from the pit." The verb form of this word has to do with corruption and destruction. The Lord said of the people at the time of Noah, "Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight and was full of violence." In Deuteronomy 4 the Lord warns his people about the corruption that will come from the worship of idols. He says to them, "Therefore watch yourselves carefully so that you do not become corrupt and make for yourselves an idol, an image of any shape, whether formed like a man or woman."

We see people dig holes or pits for themselves in which they become totally corrupted by greed, or immorality or hatred or anger. This past week Bernie Madoff was sentenced for swindling billions of dollars from people. He spoke to his victims at his sentencing and apologized for making a mess of his life and stealing from them. A governor from North Carolina confesses to having an affair with a woman that he loves, even though he has a wife and family. I am holding in my hand a spade to remind ourselves this morning of how people dig holes for themselves, holes of corruption, holes that eventually will lead to destruction and eternal death unless we are redeemed.

How many holes have you dug in your life? Some of your saddest moments in life have come from the holes of sin and corruption you have dug for yourself. How true are the words of Jeremiah 17, "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" And what does the Lord do for us? He redeems us from the pit. He redeems us from the pit and allows us to serve him in his kingdom. Our second lesson for today from 2 Corinthians 5 tells us, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"

Martin Luther spoke eloquently on this redemption from the pit in the words of the Small Catechism: "Christ has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death. All this he did that I should be his own, and live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness."

Within our country we have people living their daily lives redeemed from the pit. They are redeemed citizens of the kingdom of God living within our country. They are a blessing to our land as they serve the Lord by loving their country, praying for it, supporting it with their taxes and living lives that glorify the Lord. This nation is blessed when a group of citizens live their lives out of love for the Lord who has redeemed them.

Blessed with God's unfailing love

This land is also blessed by people who know God's unfailing love. The psalmist David says that the Lord "crowns you with love and compassion." Our nation has been privilege to be a nation that enjoys showing love and compassion to other people. Beneath the Statue of Liberty are the words, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free. The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"

Even more important than the evidence of human love is the revelation of God's unfailing love that comes to us on the pages of the Bible. America is a beautiful land, because it is a place where Moms and Dads still teach their children the important words, "Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to him belong. They are weak but he is strong. Yes, Jesus loves me, yes Jesus loves me, yes Jesus loves me, the Bible tells me so." God has blessed America. Amen.