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September 9, 2007
"Faith Unfolded: 'Held by God'"
Rev. Jim Wood

We are concluding today our series on what we have traditionally known as the five points of Calvinism. I know that sounds a little too doctrinal, but it's really the five principles of Presbyterianism that every tradition, every Christian tradition would hold to, and yet we really emphasize. Today we are looking at the last of those, it is called being "Held by God" or in the old traditional language it was known as the "Perseverance of the Saints," the idea that God is with us in and through all things. Next week we are starting a new series. It will be ten weeks in 1st and 2nd Timothy and the focus for this next ten weeks will be how is it that we can see the presence of God in life? How is it that I can find God? How is it that I can see what's going on, not only in the great celebrations of life, but in those times that are trying as well? It will be I think a wonderful challenge for us for the next series.

Today we are looking at a text in the Psalms, Psalm 103. We are going to do a small little thing to start with. This is a fun thing that will really help you in your Bible reading. This psalm if you look at it has 22 verses. Anytime a psalm or a text has 22 verses in the Old Testament, it is making a point. There are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet and what is usually done when you find the 22 verses is the first letter, the second letter, the third letter, each verse begins with a word that has the first letter of one of the letters in that alphabet. It is an intent to say that this is a text, this is a verse, this is a psalm that is speaking about the wholeness of our experience of God. It knows that it can't hit everything but it wants to cover the breadth of experience in relationship with God. This one actually is not letter by letter, but the fact that it's 22 verses is extremely intentional from the psalmist. The psalmist wants us to know that this is a text that's going to cover the fullness of our experience with God.

The other thing is anytime you find a verse or a chapter or a section divided out in either the Old Testament or the New Testament where the first verse and the last verse are the same, it is known as an *inclusio*. An *inclusio* means that that is to be understood on its own and that whatever it starts with and whatever it ends with is the theme for all of it. For example today, it says, "Bless the Lord, O my soul." When you get to the end you'll see in verse 22 that it says the exact same thing. This is a psalm without even having read it yet you already know that it is a psalm that is saying "I'm giving you the fullness of experience of relationship with God, as full as I can as a human, and I'm building on that theme, what it is to bless the Lord." That word blessed or to bless in Hebrew is a word that literally means to bend the knee, to pay homage, to get down as you would to a king or a dignitary or someone.

Listen for the word of our Lord.

Old Testament Reading – Psalm 103

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name.

*Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits –
who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases,
who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love
and mercy,
who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is
renewed like the eagle's.*

The LORD works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed.

He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel.

*The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in
steadfast love.*

He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever.

*He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according
to our iniquities.*

*For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love
toward those who fear him;*

*as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions
from us.*

*As a father has compassion for his children, so the LORD has compassion
for those who fear him.*

For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust.

*As for mortals, their days are like grass; they flourish like a flower of the
field;*

for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more.

*But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on
those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's children,
to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments.*

*The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom
rules over all.*

*Bless the LORD, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his bidding,
obedient to his spoken word.*

Bless the LORD, all his hosts, his ministers that do his will.

Bless the LORD, all his works, in all places of his dominion. Bless the LORD, O my soul.

Now in the New Testament, the 12th chapter of Romans. Romans has a shift in the 12th chapter; the first 11 chapters are theological in construct, not to say that the last aren't, but it's really Paul presenting his case on how it is that Jesus Christ is Savior, how it is that He's God, His power, all of that is presented in those 11 chapters. When we get to the 12th chapter we get to a theological "therefore," which is really moving toward an application. What does this mean for my life now? How do I live my life? It's very interesting that when he does that he starts with two things that are critical he would say to every aspect of the Christian life. The first is to present our bodies as a living sacrifice, to be able to give of ourselves, to sacrifice our own wants and desires for the life of others, in particular in my relationship with God. He says that's what my worship is, what my spiritual worship actually is, to come here, to come before the throne, to bend the knee, to bless the Lord and to give of my life to Him. Secondly, I think it's amazing and powerful to note that as Paul begins the applications, he begins how we live our lives, he says to us it's in the church that this happens. It's in being together. It's not in just reading, understanding, and going out and being out on your own, but it is about what we gain by being together. Most importantly keep in mind as you listen to this that Paul doesn't speak just about what it makes us in the body, well you know we've all got different gifts and we bring those gifts and look how great it is when we are together. That's true, but we come together for a purpose, and that purpose is to serve the world. It is to be the Body of Christ, which is a sacrifice to the world.

Listen for the 12th Chapter.

New Testament Reading – Romans 12

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.

For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function,

so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.

We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith;

ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching;

the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good;

love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor.

Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.

Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.

Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.

Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are.

Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.

If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."

No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads."

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

I was telling our staff in worship on Tuesday, they already knew it anyway, but I'm a real nerd in a lot of aspects of life. One of them in particular is in reading, in what I read and the way I go about it. It works for me, so I don't really apologize. I have certain books that I read periodically, and I have them actually in a rotation by years. I read *Moby Dick* every certain number of years, I read *Huckleberry Finn* every couple of years. I have one book that I just started again last week that I read every four years. It's just in my rotation for every four years, and it is *The Republic* by Plato. This particular copy I've had probably for fifteen years and it's all marked up with different pen markings, and it's just a meaningful thing for me to do. I was reflecting this year why is it that *The Republic* by Plato, at 2500 years old or so, is still so significant, not just for me but for all of philosophy; in fact, Whitehead and Bertrand Russell in

the 20th century, two great philosophers by philosophical standards from different ilks, both of them said that all Western philosophy is only a footnote on this one book.

Why is it that it goes back for over 2000 years and it's had such a huge impact? Plato was Greek and lived in Athens. He wrote before the time of Jesus, yet when the Jews and the Christians first started to find Plato they actually were convinced that Moses came across him and they had met each other because there were so many similarities in the way they thought in their world views. This is a text that has been used by the Christian church, by the Muslim tradition, by Judaism – it's a dominant text. Why is it? I don't want to get into the actual philosophical points of it, but what I would say is that I am coming to realize that *The Republic* has lived so long not only for what it says but because of the way it is told. It's written not as a book that is a textbook; it's not written by someone who says, "This is what I believe and let me explain why I believe it." It's not written as classic text would be. It's written as a series of dialogues, conversations between people, usually at parties where they're enjoying themselves, sitting back, kicked back, having a good time and they're just talking about things. It's really even hard to know what Plato himself believes, but what you do realize very early on is that Plato is obsessed with finding wisdom, and Plato believes that wisdom is found when you're in relationship. It's found by talking to someone, with someone who differs from you. It comes in being able to carry on conversations with varieties of different peoples and to see what happens when those conversations are done openly and freely. That's what has made *The Republic* I think last so long is that wisdom is measured by relationship.

A couple of weeks ago a famous billionaire died. She was 87 years old. I don't know if you saw it or not. She had a reputation for being a mean person. She left though, \$12 million to her dog. I think it's a dog – it's a Maltese; I thought it was a falcon for a while, but I think a Maltese is actually a little dog (laughter). She left \$12 million to her little dog. How can a mean person do that? She left two or her four grandchildren \$5 million a piece, and then two of her grandchildren she didn't leave anything. She wrote them out of the will, and the will actually said, "For reasons that are known to them." So, \$12 million for your dog and nothing for two of your grandchildren. I would suspect that when history plays out this billionaire's life, whether she was successful or not will be measured not in how much money she had, but in the relationships she had or didn't have. I've got to tell you, I love dogs. I really even like little dogs, but if your love for your dog is greater than your desire to be in relationship with someone in your family, what does that say about our lives? What does that say about who we are?

When we get to Psalm 103 it's so amazing to me. We talked about it, 22 verses - it's going to include the fullness. Did you get that? Isn't it cool how it just really tries to get every aspect in those small verses as the psalmist understands them? Talking about how it is that we bless the Lord. It's all about relationship isn't it? It's about bending the knee; it's about being with God and being in relationship with Him. This is the thing that is so important for us to realize, this is why the self-help books really don't work ultimately long-term for the Christian. I read a lot of them, but that's not to say that there's not some value in them and I can't gain some things, but our faith is a faith that is known by relationship, and so in Psalm 103 we are called to bless the Lord by being with Him and by remembering who He is, by being able to say over and over "This is who You are. You are God. Beautiful words. It's an amazing text: "Do not forget all his benefits - who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's. The LORD works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed."

This is a calling to be in relationship with Him. To come and to be with Him and to live with Him and that's where we find our power as believers of this God. That's where we find our witness. It's not just about reading a book and saying, "How's this book going to apply to my life? I'm going to take this and I don't need this right now." No, it's not about that; it is about coming and being in relationship. That's what the psalmist ultimately wants to get across over and over and over in these 22 verses. The thing that is so amazing about it is that it's not just looking at the things that we do to bless God, the ways that we respond, but it's focusing as well on the fact that God blesses us first, that He comes to us and establishes the relationship. The relationship that He establishes is one that forgives even our sins. "He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us." This God of ours is a God who wants to call us into relationship so that we can be made free, so that we can be forgiven, so that we can live our lives fully and wholly. That's the offering that we have. We find it in the Old Testament; it's there, but it's there seeking to be found. When we get to the New Testament we find that this forgiveness is now fully and totally offered and it is offered by a relationship. It's not offered by a knowledge; it's not offered by reading a book and being able to follow its guidelines. It's offered by a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Think about this for a moment. Isn't it interesting that Jesus was God and was also a great man; fully human, fully God. He had thousands and thousands of people following Him either in a one or three-year ministry depending on which of the Gospels we are reading. This guy had huge influence. Isn't it interesting that He never wrote a book? I would have written a book, *The Autobiography of a Perfect Man*. Everybody would want to read that. I would have written a book. He didn't even really preach long. His longest sermon we have is the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew Chapters 5 through 7. You can read it in about nine or ten minutes. He has people bring Him friends that need to be healed. He has people that come and ask Him questions. All of that in conversation; everything Jesus does is in conversation - even at the Sermon on the Mount if you look at it. Go back to Matthew and see it. Jesus has a big gathering of people and He pulls His disciples into the center and He starts to teach them. He's teaching His closest disciples while everyone else is listening. Even that teaching is done in relationship. This is what Christ offers, this is who He is.

He offers us this relationship with Him and it's a relationship of the fullness of forgiveness, that we no longer are bound by our old selves, that we have fully a new life. We find that in that relationship and this relationship is totally Jesus' doing. You and I didn't do anything to earn it and you and I don't do anything to lose it - it's all Him. It's all about Jesus. It's totally His doing. This is the principle for us as Presbyterians that's really at the heart of all of these. It's being held by God. The old language calls it the Perseverance of the Saints, but it's really a notion that there is nothing that we can do that can separate us from the love of God, we are held by Him and literally we are drawn into this relationship. Not into His teachings, not into His miracles, but into that relationship. You and I don't do anything to earn it. You and I don't do anything to lose it. It's all about God. So then, people would naturally say, "So wait a minute, I didn't do anything to earn it?" "No, it's just all about Jesus." "I don't do anything to lose it?" "No, it's all about Jesus." "I don't have to do anything, right?" "You are 100% right. You don't have to do one blasted thing. Nothing." "Well, let's just go home then. Let's just say God loves me and I can't mess that up. I didn't do anything to earn it and I can't do anything to lose it. Let's just go home." If it was a truth that was written down as an argument for you, you could do that, but you see because it's a relationship we never will. Because it's a relationship we never walk away from it. We never walk away from it. We let that relationship build and lead us into new things.

That's why when *Time* magazine puts Mother Teresa on its cover and you start to look at that article and you start to look at all the other things, I mean it's all over the place because of these writings of Mother Teresa. Mother Teresa evidently for a number of years had a lot of doubts, had a lot of concerns, and had a lot of fears. The world looks at that and says, "Oh, yeah, look at that. Here's a woman, she was supposed to be such a special woman with great faith, and look at her. Even she had all kinds of fears and all kinds of doubts and all kinds of concerns." We as Christians look at that and say, "What's the point? Of course she had doubts and fears and concerns. She was a woman" (laughter). I didn't mean it that way (laughter). She was a human. You guys just run with anything I say (laughter). She was a human; she was a human being and if she didn't have doubts and fears and concerns she wasn't really in a relationship with Jesus Christ.

It's only by being in that relationship with Jesus Christ that you start to come to grips with those doubts and fears and concerns. You know you don't read a lot of self-help books that tell you, "I'm writing this and I'm a person who's still dominated by doubts and fears and concerns but what I have to share with you I think is going to make a difference in your life maybe but I'm still doubtful and fearful and concerned." No, but for the Christian we are actually drawn to those people. What makes Mother Teresa to me the powerful instrument of God that she has been and will continue to be even in her death, is that she was a woman of doubt and fear and concern and yet she still stayed in the hold of God. She still was held by God. It as if God is the Hound of Heaven, that old poem, that chases us relentlessly, that doesn't let us go. This is the principle for us that determines everything in our relationship with this God. This is it. I didn't do anything to earn it. I don't do anything to lose it, but I know that my salvation is going to be experienced and in experiencing it I'm going to be in a walk with God.

When I get to Romans it's not surprising that Paul begins his application of all of his theology, what does all of this mean about Jesus being God? What does this mean about Him being the Savior for all the world? Well it means that you and I are first of all called to be living sacrifices. We are supposed to live out our relationship with Jesus in relationships with the world, to give of ourselves, to sacrifice of who we are. We are also supposed to not only just be those living sacrifices, but we are to be the visible church. We are supposed to bring our gifts and bring our challenges. We are supposed to bring the good parts of our lives and we are supposed to bring those painful parts of our lives and we come together as the body. We don't come together as the body so that well I can get fixed and just go off and do my own thing. We come together as the body to stay the body, to stay together as the visible church which is the Body of Christ. We are given the privilege as we are together to see salvation being lived out in not only in our lives but salvation for the world. I've got to tell you that if you have ever experienced that, it is something to die for literally.

There are people here who have been on those experiences. Some of them have been in mission trips in Nicaragua or Guatemala or Honduras. Some of those have been people who have gone to Africa and Kenya, and other places, but a number of those are people as well who have experienced it in their own home, experienced it in a transformed life of someone they've witnessed. They've experienced this powerful relationship and this powerful living out of salvation and when it happens it is something that you literally stand and say, "If I didn't live another day what I have seen has been enough for me to bring meaning to all my life." That's why we stay together. That's why we don't go home and say, "Well, God loves me. I can do anything I want to do." God loves me and I can do anything I want to do and I want to continue to experience that love.

I've been sharing with you a variety of different stories since I returned from Kenya. One is about a little boy named Nguffo who is about eight years old we think. We don't really know what his birthdate is. Nguffo comes from a family of six children. His father was brutally murdered and his mother has a severe alcohol problem and she just really wasn't able to deal with all of the stress and so she literally just left. She left these six kids with the oldest sister who at the time was 15 years old; she was a single mom, she had already had a baby, was trying to raise her child, and then these other kids come all of them boys. Nguffo was the youngest. He has severe epilepsy, so much that he would have hundreds of seizures in a day and because of that he was considered to be extremely learning disabled or severely disabled in a variety of ways. Nobody even seemed to know his name. He was malnourished; all of the kids were. Through some of the ministries that take place here through the things that you do we have been able to help Nguffo and so many others, but this is one little boy that we've been able to get into preschool. He's 8 years old and going to preschool with all of these little kids. We've gotten him some clean clothes for him to go to church on Sunday. We have a meal that's provided for him and his brothers in the morning and in the evening, a nutritious meal that's cooked by a woman who's just fallen in love with them. Through ministries that you've provided we've been able to help him get his medicine and we have someone that actually gives him his medicine because nobody in his family seemed to be responsible enough to do it. This little boy has been soaring in so many ways, and it was such a great thing for me to go back in June to see that.

About a week and a half ago I got an e-mail from Kenya and it said, "Pastor Jim, we want to let you know that Nguffo is missing. He's been missing for three days and we don't know where he is. We've looked and asked and looked and asked." Nguffo and his brothers have been doing so well actually that their mother heard that they were doing well. She thought that they must have some support from some rich Americans perhaps, so she started showing up a little bit. She would come for a day or two, get drunk enough just to wander off and leave and go for a couple of weeks and then she would come back for a day or two. After his mother had gone, a week and a half ago, Nguffo decided he was going to go find his mom. He saw the direction that she started walking from the hospital and he just started walking. 20 miles knocking on almost every single door saying, "Do you know where my mom is?" Two days after that e-mail I got an e-mail back that they found him in Kiambu Town, literally 20 miles away. This little boy for five days had eaten nothing, I guess, lived in the street, and knocked on doors, just because he wanted to find his mom.

There are a lot of things in the world I don't understand. I don't understand how a man can beat his wife. I don't understand how a woman, a mother, can leave her children. I don't understand why rape and murder and disparity of income that lets people die exist in the world. I don't understand those things. But, I do understand something in this story. I understand a little boy who wants to be loved so much that he would walk five days, 20 miles knocking on doors saying "Is my mom here?" I know that and you know that because it is at the heart of our lives isn't it? Every one of us wants to be loved. The world says you want to be accomplished, you want to be famous, but that's not it is it? You and I want to be loved. We want to be loved by someone. We all understand that and you and I know as well what it is like to knock on door after door after door saying, "Is there someone here who will love me?" We see it when we see young women in their youth give up their sexuality because they think it will make a boy love them. We see these boys knock on doors when they think to be able to have conquest over women is to have power that equates to love. We see it in the lives of people who go out and knock on all kinds of doors that lead to addiction and frustration and abandonment. You and I have knocked on those doors haven't we? We know what it is. We know what it is to desperately desire just to be loved.

The one other thing I know without any shadow of a doubt is that as soon as this little boy realizes the right door to knock on he will experience the love of a parent who will never abandon him, someone who will give His life for him, because you and I have experienced that as well haven't we. If we know Jesus Christ, if we know His forgiveness, if we know His love, if we know His grace, we know what it is like to rest in the arms of a loving God that will never leave us alone, and a loving God that says, "You need not knock anymore. You've found. I'm here and I will never ever leave you. My steadfast love endures forever." Because of that you and I today are given the privilege of standing at the other side of the door. You and I are given the privilege of standing at the door and letting the world come and knock in all of its aimless wandering, to let the world come and knock one person at a time and say, "Is this a place where I will be loved?" and for us to say without any hesitation, "Yes, come in and be in a place where steadfast love never ends." That's why you and I are here. That's what it is to be the Body of Christ. That's what it is to share our lives together, to be a living witness for this world as it wanders and as it seeks to find its wholeness. You and I have the privilege of experiencing it. It doesn't get any better than that.

Amen.