

"HOW DO WE LIFT UP OUR SOULS?"  
Feb. 18, First Sunday in Lent

Sermon by Pastor Clare Gromoll  
Psalm 25:1-10, Mark 1:9-15

Let's begin this time of reflection with prayer. God of Love, be with us now – helping us to move into our quiet center, where we breathe your Spirit in and out more deeply. Teach us, teach us how to lift our souls up to you. Amen.

Beloved friends, how do we lift up our souls? This question was inspired by words in today's reading from Psalm 25:

"To you, God, I lift up my soul. My God, I trust in you..."

I have a joyfully skewed previous relationship with those Psalmist's lyrics. I lived my college summers serving in outdoor ministry settings before then working full-time at a camp and retreat center in Texas for several years immediately after graduating. A standard favorite camp song inspired by Psalm 25 went like this:

"To You, O Lord, I lift up my soul (clap clap); in You I trust, O Lord!

Higher than the mountains, deeper than the sea,

wider than the ocean is Your love for me!

You're with me on the mountain and the valley below.

You are right here beside me everywhere that I go!" (Krista Wiger)

The tune is joyful and catchy and the belief in an ever-present and powerfully loving God is core to our Christian faith. Yet the focus of the song strays from Psalm 25, which is essentially an expression of vulnerable longing in the form and tones of a chant. Perhaps we will arrive to a feeling of contagious joy by the end of this sermon, but we will start in a more pensive space.

As Jesus journeys into the wilderness in our gospel reading for today, he teaches us lessons about how to lift up our souls to God. As I wondered this past week about what it means to lift up my soul to God, I returned time and again to this conviction:

The Love of God cannot do nearly as much in, with and through a distracted or less than true self as Love can do in, with and through a fully present, bravely vulnerable self. I sense that both the Psalmist and Jesus long to share with us reminders of how to be fully present and bravely vulnerable.

Before we come alongside Jesus in the wilderness, let's attempt to discover what the Psalmist meant with their opening statement - "To you, God, I lift up my soul. My God, I trust in you..."

I hear two movements in the Psalm. In the first movement, the Psalmist turns toward the Love of God, praying for a reminder that they are God's very good creation, teachable in the way of salvation – that is the way of Love more powerful than fear. We heard:

"don't let me be ashamed, don't let my enemies triumph over me.

No – none who hope in you will be ashamed...

Show me your ways, God! Teach me your paths!

Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation.

I wait all the day long for you."

I wonder: When have you last felt the conviction that you are God's good creation, capable of learning, growing, and transforming? That knowledge is more powerful than all of the shaming messages life experiences attempt to place on our shoulders.

The Psalmist's second movement is one toward repentance and praise that is born out of the overwhelming experience of being forgiven. Perhaps this is where the camp song found its inspiration. We heard:

"Remember your mercies, God, your love – your ancient and unwavering love!

Pardon the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways...

You instruct sinners in the path,

you guide the humble in what is right, and teach them your way.

All of your paths, God, are full of love and faithfulness

for those who keep your Covenant and Testimonies."

The word covenant means that the Love of God is relational.

I wonder: When have you last felt the warmth of relief wash over you after making a bravely humble move to acknowledge your own wrong doing (a move you made that hurt yourself or another)? True, genuine love is a two-way street (covenantal, relational). We experience God's ever-present love most powerfully when we dare to practice it with humility.

I would summarize the Psalmist's message to us in this way: To lift up one's soul is to move toward the light of Love with a posture of teachable humility.

Let's turn to Jesus to contemplate a first century CE embodiment of teachable humility. I note three movements in Jesus' example of faithful lifting up of his soul. We heard:

"In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove upon him. And a voice came from the heavens, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

I hear how the Spirit of God was affirming Jesus in his belovedness. I wonder (over and over this winter, it seems): will you receive and trust God's affirmation through whomever it may come?

We heard Jesus' second movement: "And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tested by Satan, and he was with the wild beasts, and the angels waited on him."

I hear how the Spirit of God drove, pushed, compelled Jesus toward challenging experiences that would help him grow... and how that same Spirit stayed with him through it all. I wonder: toward what challenge are you feeling driven, pushed, compelled? I hope you feel the same Spirit compelling and comforting you.

We heard Jesus' third movement: "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

I hear how Jesus felt the unjust arrest of his cousin and knew he was in for even bigger trouble that would lead to his public execution. I hear how the injustice against his cousin strengthened Jesus' resolve to speak and act out for God's love and justice. I wonder: how might you move from dismay or rage at injustice toward action on behalf of building the beloved community? How might we do that together?

As I draw this reflection to a close, I would like to offer you gifts from two authors. In her book, *Simple Ways: Towards the Sacred*; writer, meditation teacher, and psychotherapist Gunilla Norris offers these questions for consideration when facing into and receiving challenges:

“Could I allow God’s love to penetrate my outrage and suffering?

Could a perception grow within me that I do not suffer this day’s sorrows alone—that many others accompany me?

Could I grow to be equal to the trust God has in me?”

These are wise questions for times when we are facing into and receiving challenges. Gunilla Norris offers these questions for consideration when facing into and receiving opportunities:

“Today, could I notice the open curiosity that God has placed within me—that innocence and capacity to participate in opportunity?

Could I also understand that opportunities lie in refusing to participate in destructive habits? Then saying no will be saying yes to a greater good.

I know I cannot move mountains. Could I just take the next, possible step towards unfolding—and know that is enough?”

These are wise questions for times when we are facing into and receiving opportunities. I do always share the text of a sermon on our website, so if you want to return to her questions, you can at any time.

And, finally, Henri Nouwen was a Dutch Catholic priest who lived and taught across the twentieth century. He has affected many with his writings on spirituality, social justice, and community. I invite you to what he writes here as a blessing and invitation as we enter this season of Lent. He wrote the following in his 1972 book entitled *With Open Hands*:

“There are as many ways to pray as there are moments in life. Sometimes we seek out a quiet spot and want to be alone, sometimes we look for a friend and want to be together. Sometimes we like a book, sometimes we prefer music. Sometimes we want to sing out with hundreds, sometimes only whisper with a few. Sometimes we want to say it with words, sometimes with a deep silence. In all these moments, we gradually make our lives more of a prayer, and we open our hands to be led by God even to places we would rather not go.”

This Lent, with Henri Nouwen, may we make our lives more of a prayer. May we find ways to pray – that is, to be fully, bravely, vulnerably present with the Love of God. The Love of God cannot do nearly as much in, with and through our distracted or less than true self as Love can do in, with and through our fully present, bravely vulnerable self. May we lift up our souls to the Love of God because that Love is counting on us. Amen.