

A Song of Steadfast Love

Sermon by Pastor Patricia Geiseman
March 10-11, 2018
Lent 4

O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
for his steadfast love endures forever.
Let the redeemed of the LORD say so,
those he redeemed from trouble
and gathered in from the lands,
from the east and from the west,
from the north and from the south.

Some were sick through their sinful ways,
and because of their iniquities endured affliction;
they loathed any kind of food,
and they drew near to the gates of death.
Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,
and he saved them from their distress;
he sent out his word and healed them,
and delivered them from destruction.
Let them thank the LORD for his steadfast love,
for his wonderful works to humankind.
And let them offer thanksgiving sacrifices,
and tell of his deeds with songs of joy.

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22 (NRSV)*

My brother, Paul, is one of the most extroverted and charming persons I have ever known. He has the helpful gift of being honest without being mean. When I call him up and ask, "How are you doing?", he never ever says, "Fine."

He tells me *exactly* how he is doing. Usually he is super busy as a non-stop sales rep, but he also loves to travel, learn new things and make home improvements. Paul is a sharer. The good and the bad. In a recent conversation I heard about how one of the dogs bit a man who came to bid on a painting project. He worried about the workman, but also about the outcome. But then he cheerfully reported how great the new bathroom looks. Paul stays up on politics, the economy and technology. He is honest about his struggles and worries... besides the dog (who, he says, his wife loves more than him!). I would say that he is real with me. I never hang up the phone wondering how Paul and his household are *really* doing.

In a time of over-sharing with social media, and what can often feel like TMI, some of us keep ourselves to ourselves. Not everyone can be, or needs to be, as open and talkative as my brother, but more openness with how we are really feeling can bring us closer to each other. Connection helps.

Popular advice about how to be successful includes “Fake it till you make it” and “Don’t wear your heart on your sleeve.” There is some benefit in acting confident and knowing when and how to share emotions, but being real has more advantages.

Our reading for this weekend, from Psalm 107, sings of suffering and rescue in a time and place long ago. Yet it connects with us today as we continue to be real and honest in our times of distress. It is fitting, on this fourth weekend in the Season of Lent, that we consider this Psalm’s focus on God’s caring. In the olden days, this Lenten Sunday was called “Laetare Sunday” or “Refreshment Sunday,” and the lessons reflected a change in mood from penitence to praise for divine deliverance.

Even though I love the Psalms, I hardly ever preach on them. Partly because we don’t use them in worship much expect during Lent. The Psalms are used a lot in pastoral care because so many of them focus on our needs as human beings. The Psalms are songs, and poetry. In her book *Cloister Walk*, Author Kathleen Norris reminds us that the Psalms are poetry, and poetry’s function is not to explain but to offer images and stories that resonate with our lives.

Many of the Psalms were used in liturgy, in times of worship like right now. It is meaningful, I think, and kind of awesome, to imagine that our Psalm for this weekend were used as a litany more than 2500 years ago.

This Psalm is a prayer of thanksgiving for steadfast love (*hesed*). This love does not focus on the cause of the hardship, but on the restoration of those who suffer.

Through four different vignettes, the Psalm’s message is that God cares deeply. Divine priority is health, not harshness. The Lord gathers the people ... from the east and west, north and south. (For God so loved the world!)

These four groups of people represent the “redeemed of the LORD”:

1. **Wanderers** “from the east” lost in the desert, who finally arrive at their destination.
2. **Prisoners** “from the west,” who are set free.
3. **“Sick” persons** “from the north,” who are healed.
4. **Sailors** “from the south,” who are saved from shipwreck.

Each of the four vignettes follows a format:

- a description of the distress
- a prayer to the Lord
- details of delivery
- an expression of thanks

Distress, prayer, delivery—and thanks. The refrain in Verse 21 is spoken four times over the course of the Psalms: *“Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind.”*

1. Wanderers “from the east” who are lost

We may never find ourselves literally wandering in a desert, forced to live in deep darkness. But we do know what feels like to be lost, unsure of where to go or what to do next.

The old Psalm encourages us to speak up. Ask for directions! And, for the love of God, be honest! If not with everyone, with someone! Depression can feel like walking around in the dark. It’s lonely.

We can bump into hard objects. And it hurts.

And the Psalm reminds us to listen to the cry of others who wander. An estimated 65 million people in our world are displaced due to violence and poverty. Which means they are not at home. Nearly 50 million children are refugees or migrants. This is 1 in 113 people! How are they gathered in?

2. Prisoners “from the west” who are in misery

Most of us—none of us, I hope—will never go to jail. Not literally. But we know in some ways what it feels like to be stuck in gloom and limited in life, bound and not free. We can be stuck in relationships, in jobs, and in roles.

Our own thoughts can feel like prison.

And the old Psalm urges us to remember those who are in prison. There are about 2.3 million persons incarcerated in the U.S., in more than 6,000 correctional facilities. The sad reality is that the U.S. is ranked as number one in the world for incarceration. Certainly, this does not bring the wholeness and freedom that the Lord intends.

3. Sick “from the north” who are in distress

The verses about the “sick” are included our lectionary reading. They speak of people who were *“sick because of their sinful ways.”*

The word translated “sick” in the NRSV actually means “foolish ones.” Ancient people associated sickness with sin. We do suffer from our foolishness. And ... destructive behaviors.

Five foolish things we do could include:

- **We follow the wrong things** ... Goals and good actions seem up stream, so they are harder. Instead we go with the flow.
- **We blow up** ... Bad decisions are made in the heat of anger. In Proverbs we read that any fool can start an argument. Having a chip on our shoulder leaves us vulnerable. Anger that is too intense can lead to poor decision-making and problem-solving, create problems at home, at work and at school. Unchecked anger can affect our health. Young bullies grow up to be big bullies.
- **We continue in bad habits** ... We don't intend to start bad habits. No one wakes up in the morning and thinks, 'I think I will start a bad habit today!' But too much of something that can harm us can become addictive. Bad habits aren't always easy to discern or admit. They get stronger and harder to break with time. Most of our bad habits continue but not because we don't have enough information. We know better. But it is hard!
- **We believe lies** ... Lies about others, ourselves and the world. Lies come in attractive packages. I heard on a detective program that lies change, but the truth stays the same.
- **We commit to something we shouldn't** ... Hasty decisions and thoughtless promises make for suffering. We make commitments without weighing the long-term consequences. We may carry too much debt, marry the person we hoped we could "fix" or who could fix us, or say yes to friendships that turn out to be toxic.

The good news of the old Psalm is that The Lord of Steadfast Love gathers us. Even the foolish!

4. **Sailors "from the south" who are caught in a storm**

I can handle kayaking down the Fox, but anything choppy makes me really sick. Years ago, in Michigan we rented ocean kayaks with the boys. I don't know what I was thinking!

The waves of Lake Michigan were way too much for me. Ed and I were in a two-seated kayak; I tried paddling like crazy, and I tried closing my eyes and not paddling at all. But the waves were too much. I can get sick just thinking about it! And I told my guys I had to put in. Of course, there is an unflattering, but realistic, photo of me lying on the beach with my life vest as a pillow trying to regain my equilibrium. I was beached like Jonah!

Well, sometimes the waves of life are choppy. And we are like sailors on a treacherous sea. Overwhelmed. Queasy. Sometimes we try to paddle like crazy, do more, be more, say more... more... more.

Other times we say, "Forget it!" And close our eyes to the problems and not paddle at all.

From the four corners of the earth, the God-who-loved-the world-so-much gathers us in ...

From the east: Those who wander and are lost ... belong.

From the west: Those who are trapped in misery ... are free.

From the north: Those who are entangled in foolishness are straightened out.

From the south: Those overwhelmed with waves of doubt, despair, fear, and failure are given a beach of peace.

Kathleen Norris reminds us that the Psalms are unrelenting in their realism about the human psyche. They teach to us live with the questions, which propels us into prayer. Through the Psalms we can see that the story of people long ago is our story. And their song is our song.

This Lenten time we can let go of our pretenses and fears. Loosen our grip. Look for the light. See that the door is open. Be honest with ourselves about ourselves, and trust in the One who calmed the Storm.

Like our ancestors in faith, we gather and ask for what we need. This is the heart of our worship and we do this together.

We trust in Abundant Love so much that we can open our eyes, recognize, and admit our distress: Things in our lives are not always "FINE!" Sometimes dogs we love do bite!

We can ask for what we need. Accept help. And give thanks.

With people who lived long before us we can join the refrain...

"Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind."

Amen.

Resources:

Kathleen Norris, *Cloister Walk*

Feasting on the Word for Lent 4, year B

workingpreacher.org

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