

December 18, 2016
Sermon for Fourth Sunday in Advent
St Peter Lutheran Church
Bowie, TX
Larry Knobloch, Pastor
Psalm 136

J.J.- Jesu Juva—Help me, Jesus

Psalm 136:1–26 (ESV)

¹ Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever. ² Give thanks to the God of gods, for his steadfast love endures forever. ³ Give thanks to the Lord of lords, for his steadfast love endures forever; ⁴ to him who alone does great wonders, for his steadfast love endures forever; ⁵ to him who by understanding made the heavens, for his steadfast love endures forever; ⁶ to him who spread out the earth above the waters, for his steadfast love endures forever; ⁷ to him who made the great lights, for his steadfast love endures forever; ⁸ the sun to rule over the day, for his steadfast love endures forever; ⁹ the moon and stars to rule over the night, for his steadfast love endures forever; ¹⁰ to him who struck down the firstborn of Egypt, for his steadfast love endures forever; ¹¹ and brought Israel out from among them, for his steadfast love endures forever; ¹² with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, for his steadfast love endures forever; ¹³ to him who divided the Red Sea in two, for his steadfast love endures forever; ¹⁴ and made Israel pass through the midst of it, for his steadfast love endures forever; ¹⁵ but overthrew Pharaoh and his host in the Red Sea, for his steadfast love endures forever; ¹⁶ to him who led his people through the wilderness, for his steadfast love endures forever; ¹⁷ to him who struck down great kings, for his steadfast love endures forever; ¹⁸ and killed mighty kings, for his steadfast love endures forever; ¹⁹ Sihon, king of the Amorites, for his steadfast love endures forever; ²⁰ and Og, king of Bashan, for his steadfast love endures forever; ²¹ and gave their land as a heritage, for his steadfast love endures forever; ²² a heritage to Israel his servant, for his steadfast love endures forever. ²³ It is he who remembered us in our low estate, for his steadfast love endures forever; ²⁴ and rescued us from our foes, for his steadfast love endures forever; ²⁵ he who gives food to all flesh, for his steadfast love endures forever. ²⁶ Give thanks to the God of heaven, for his steadfast love endures forever.

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ!

Amen.

If you're a fan of old movies, especially "holiday classics," you'll have no trouble telling me how a song-and-dance man named Bob Wallace cures a troubling case of insomnia for a singer named Betty Haynes in a remote and snowless and all-but-empty Vermont ski lodge. If I haven't given you enough clues yet, just ask yourself what to do "when you're worried, and you can't sleep."

Of course, I'm talking about the scene from Irving Berlin's 1954 movie, "White Christmas." Bing Crosby croons the lullaby to Rosemary Clooney, but it's the bit of advice he gives her that I want to remind you of. What do you do "when you're worried, and you can't sleep, just count your blessings instead of sheep."

This is not my text for this morning, by the way, but it is a good starting point for us to work our way toward our text: Psalm 136.

The song is more than just a bit of schmaltzy Hollywood romance, although it is certainly that. Even our popular culture can admit the value of gratitude for blessings received, though it may remain quite fuzzy on the source of those blessings. The song's logic is that gratitude, knowing that our lives are filled with gracious gifts, can quiet the voices of worry and anxiety, letting calm and contentment soothe us into peaceful sleep.

St Paul also knows the value of gratitude, even better than Bing Crosby did. He writes to the Colossians, in chapter 2:6–7, "*Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him,⁷ rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.*" Col. 2:6–7 (ESV)

Commenting on this passage, A. T. Robertson once wrote: [Paul's hearers] walk as live men, they take root like a tree; they are built up like a house. They grow firmer all the while.

Paul is optimistic concerning the outcome in Colossae. If they do these things, [the Colossians] will naturally be “abounding (in it) in thanksgiving.” ... “thankfulness is a preservative against the new doctrines.” The overflow of gratitude to Christ will close the door against the theological malcontents.³

Paul’s concern is not that the Colossians will spend another sleepless night because of their worries and anxieties; his concern is much more serious. Someone or something has been trying to persuade the Colossians that the Christ, their Lord Jesus, is not enough.

Paul urges his hearers—for their own protection—to keep on walking the “Christ Path,” the “Jesus Road.”⁴ And—also for their own protection!—he urges them to continue to walk in gratitude. Abounding in thankfulness will remind his hearers of all that is theirs in Christ Jesus. What or who could then steal them away?

That you and I may be vulnerable to such temptations is probably shown in the fact that we may have been spending a lot more time lately counting *wishes* than we have counting *blessings*.

Paul’s words serve, then, as a necessary exhortation to us, as well. We are not the first among God’s people to know the dangers of “shallow thankfulness” or the risk of becoming “theological malcontents”; nor were the Colossians. Israel of old also struggled with this problem: their grumbling in the wilderness is one of the most memorable examples.

For their “protection” our psalmist provided them with the same remedy Paul prescribes: gratitude, a theological and biblical counting of blessings. “*O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever*” (Ps 136:1).

Notice where this ancient hymn of thanksgiving begins and ends. The psalmist begins with God, the only true, Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Who is timeless in glory, eternal in love, the only true wonderworker. He then takes us back to the very beginning of God’s wonders in our world, the creation of our cosmos itself.

In artistic strokes the psalmist repaints the creation narrative, and places us right in the middle of the story as witnesses of God's wonder and steadfast love.

The psalmist doesn't mention how Israel ended up in captivity in Egypt, a story of human jealousy, hatred, pride, and attempted murder, the psalmist assumes the reader knows this so he keeps our eyes firmly fixed on the steadfast love of God which holds the whole story of human history together, keeping it from crumbling into dust and ash in spite of humanity's persistent desire for self-destruction.

The sheer length of the psalm is impressive, but, at the same time, each verse brings out new memories for the speaker of this psalm, a thousand other ways in which God has manifested His forever-enduring love.

Notice also where the psalm ends: with today's dinner. The psalmist does not intend for us simply to recite the glories of some bygone age, some long ago time when God still performed wonders; he brings the story right to the here and now, right to our next meal. *"he who gives food to all flesh, for his steadfast love endures forever."*²⁶ *Give thanks to the God of heaven, for his steadfast love endures forever."*

He continues to show His love for us through the millennia that have passed between creation and the Cheerios you had for breakfast. God has and will continue to provide, even personally for you! *"for his steadfast love endures forever."*

Who could sing such a psalm of such an unrelenting and faithful love and then doubt that in the Lord our God we find our sufficiency for all things and our whole hope for the future?

At some point, of course, the psalmist ate his last meal, no doubt beginning and ending it with a prayer of thanksgiving, and then he died. He passed on to join the eternal chorus that never ceases to sing thanks to God.

But the story continued. God's love did not stop, and the psalmist's final verse serves as his invitation and plea and command that we help him continue the song.

For there is one God and one Lord and one Worker of wonders. The wonders that we have beheld since the psalmist's day are part of one and the same love song, and it is now *our* turn to take up the refrain of Giving Thanks!

As we do that, we begin to experience the full wonder of the story we're trying to tell. Even if we weren't doing this on December 18, 2016, there are words in Psalm 136 that would already suggest the wonders we read of in Matthew 1 and in the opening chapters of Luke.

Here is the God who puts down the mighty from their thrones and regards the low estate of His people—even the lowly estate of a young virgin. Had Herod and the rest of Israel sung Psalm 136 a bit more often, they could not have been so tragically mistaken about the what and the how and the why of the new wonder God was working among them on those holy starlit nights.

They all were looking for a king To slay their foes and lift the children of Israel up high. How is it possible that the One who had delivered His little flock from Pharaoh and the mighty kings of the past should come now as a tyrant himself?

How is it possible that the One who regards the low estate of His little ones, that the One who humbles Himself to care for, every day, every living creature. How is it possible that He should now come in arrogant might and high-and-mighty splendor?

It's not possible. So looking at the wonders of God in the past enables us to see His blessings right now...today! Indeed, His steadfast love endures forever. If that is so, what can separate us from that same steadfast love in the future?

We, God's people, are the most hopeful group on earth: we know why we can be hopeful, because our hope is not grounded in trust in ourselves nor in our shortsightedness nor in our naïve and blissful ignorance.

Our hope is founded upon the wonders of God from creation to cross and from empty tomb to eternity. Everything that God has promised has been fulfilled!

Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus because ... His steadfast love endures forever!

Through faith in Jesus as our Savior, we know He will come again for us so that we live in His presence forever, for His steadfast love endures forever.

Give thanks to the God of heaven, for His steadfast love endures forever.

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and min through Christ Jesus!

Amen.

3 A. T. Robertson, *Paul and the Intellectuals: The Epistle to the Colossians* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1959), 77.

4 Robertson, 77.

5 George MacDonald, "That Holy Thing," *The Gifts of the Child Christ: Fairy Tales and Stories for the Childlike* ed. Glenn Edward Sadler; Vol. II; (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 261.

Sermon Outline

HIS STEADFAST LOVE ENDURES FOREVER!

Psalm 136

- I. Our popular culture admits the value of gratitude for blessings received.
- II. The remedy for thanklessness is gratitude, a theological and biblical counting of blessings.
- III. God continues to show His love for us through the millennia that have passed between creation and today.

BEAUTIFUL SAVIOR, KING OF CREATION

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