

Sermon “Help and Thanks”
Kirk of St James
Sunday March 24, 2024
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While I was home a couple of weeks ago, a number of my family were outside on one of the warm evenings chatting. I was keeping a close eye on the boys because mom lives quite rurally and the brook behind her house was overflowing due to the rain we had had. I saw Theo go around the front of the house, and I followed him immediately, expecting to see him in front of the doors to go inside but he wasn't there. I looked in the house and he wasn't there and then I panicked. Logically I did not believe he could get past my family to the brook, but fear can be illogical, and I began to run around calling for him. He thought we were playing hide and seek, he hidden behind my uncle's truck, perfectly safe but not saying a word until we found him. He did it again here last week, we left fellowship suddenly because he ran out to the sanctuary and hid and would not answer me. That feeling, when you don't know where you children are and your mind is racing, is terribly upsetting. We as humans know that no matter what age we are, we can get lost.

While being lost may be a human experience, it is not one that God experiences. Psalm 118 is one of the most quoted psalms in the New Testament. It is a promise that Jesus and others the bible always look back to. It begins and ends in celebration of deliverance, and what follows in between is one of the most reassuring passages in the Bible.

At the heart of this psalm is a Hebrew word translated as “steadfast love.” I took Greek instead of Hebrew but according to sources “hesed” is the very essence of God’s character. As the psalm outlines it is God’s goodness, enduring love, answer to distress, present source of help, and source of strength, and salvation. I also read that the Hebrew root of “steadfast love” is a mother’s womb—God’s strong, compassionate, fiercely, steadfast love.

This psalm of thanksgiving (possibly offered by the king at the time) looks back on a period when the community was in a life-threatening situation, but they continued to trust in God despite their circumstances, and God rescues them. It is interesting thinking about the emphasis on steadfast love in this passage because at the time this type of thinking would be considered countercultural and unusual. The type of personal relationship suggested between God and the psalmist was a type of thinking not common in the ancient world. As one writer said “The gods of antiquity were stern, angry, powerful, and fearsome. They had what the Greeks called *apotheia*, from which we get our word “apathy.” They were seen as being detached from human life. Whereas today we often equate God with steadfast love, for the psalmist to describe God in this way was something new.” The idea that could God love each person, was an amazing and radical message.

That being said the idea of God as judgemental, harsh, angry, or aloof persists in our modern age. How many times has someone who has been away from church for a while comes back and they say something like “the church hasn’t fallen down on me” or,

“lightening hasn’t struck me yet.” It is meant as a joke but, sometimes I wonder if there is not also a little bit of doubt that God still loves them. There can also be the idea that God hovers about with an abacus balancing out our good and bad deeds, waiting to judge us when we make mistakes.

This psalm pushes back against these ways of thinking. Five times in this psalm (although only three are included in the lectionary passage today) we are assured of God’s steadfast love. Not fickle, not calculating, not judging but a love that envelopes us fully and unconditionally. I do not know about you, but I long to know in the core of my being that I loved.

In my reading this week one author related a story told by Ernest Hemingway. It comes from a short story he wrote called *The Capital of the World*. In it Hemingway wrote of a Spanish father who decided to reconcile with his son, who had run away to Madrid and had not been heard from in years. The father took out an ad in a Madrid newspaper: “Paco, meet me at Hotel Montana noon Tuesday. All is forgiven. Papa.” Paco is a common name in Spain, and when the father arrived at the square in front of the hotel at the appointed time, he found eight hundred young men named Paco waiting for their fathers. Hemingway captured the human longing for love and belonging achingly well. It has echoes of the prodigal son who finally comes home and is welcomed with open arms. God’s steadfast love endures forever, that promise stands at the heart of everything we are.

While this psalm does look back and give thanks for past actions it also demonstrates hope and thanks for the future as well. “Giving thanks to God is an act of prayer, as well as a reminder to the community that each day is a gift from God, and worthy of our praise. Because of all that God has done, through all the ways that God has acted, there is reason to hope: hope that God stands beside us in the worst of times; hope that God has acted, is acting, and will act on our behalf...” The future is based in the faith that God has not only been God but will continue to be God. That line brought me up short today. That the God of the Hebrew people, the God of David, the God who sent his son into the world, and as we remember on this day God who sent his son into Jerusalem, is the same God still at work in our lives today. A God of past, present, and future, who took the stone the builders rejected and turned it into the cornerstone.

As we prepare to enter into holy week, on the heels of a loud and jubilant crowd, we are reminded that empty words of praise are worth very little and steadfast love is love put into action. It is loyal, kind, compassionate, and all encompassing. Our reaction to God’s love should be thanks much like the psalm writers today. Write Ann Lamott once said if the only two prayers she ever uttered were at the beginning of the day “Help me, help me, help me” and at the end of the day “Thank you, thank you, thank you” it would be enough. I believe that ties in well with Psalm 118. In the days to come may God’s steadfast love be our guide, and may we offer our genuine thanks as we move through the difficult days to come.