

Sermon “Never Beyond Our Reach”**Kirk of St James****Sunday August 3, 2025****Rev. Amanda Henderson-Bolton**

Do you have certain times of the year that feel nostalgic to you? For me, the summertime always feels that way. I have countless favourite memories tied to this time of year. My grandparents hopping on their motor bikes and driving up from Cape Breton to visit. Family reunions, BBQ's, long days spent at the beach with cousins and friends. Picking wild plums and eating them, while running down the cottage lane barefoot. Beach towels hanging on the line, and bonfires with lots of marshmallows. It is an easy time of year to be thankful for. It is a time of year when I can read Psalm 107, and the words thank you come easily. We likely all have periods in our lives when we can feel the hope of Psalm 107 and can read the words honestly and joyfully.

The other side of this Psalm is that when we are going through a period of what the writer would call “desert wastes” it feels nearly impossible—and in some cases extremely bitter. I was looking at some of our larger family photos usually taken in the summer on the deck of my aunt and uncles' cottage, and while it is joyful to remember, I am always struck by missing my dad. Somehow, he has been gone almost nine years which is difficult to fathom. Sometimes I forget how difficult it was living with the uncertainty of his cancer diagnosis and journey. It

was a time when again to borrow a phrase from our Psalmist where it never felt like we reached an “inhabited town.” Instead, it was just miles, days and weeks of journeying through the desert. During those times it can be far harder to read Psalms like this.

“‘Oh, give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever.’ However, we know there are reasons to be hesitant. We recognize that life is fragile and can get out of hand at a moment’s notice. We know that there are inequalities in life that should temper praise, forcing us to resist glib gratitude.” How do we balance these realities in our lives? The Psalms are different than other books of the bible. They were meant for use by congregations and individuals, so how can we take a Psalm like 107 and use it in our lives in an authentic way?

One of the first things of note with this Psalm is that even though it opens in praise, it quickly transitions to describing times when people wandered in the desert wastes, and they felt faint from hunger and thirst. Part of the human story is one of both joy and sorrow—these are things we will all experience in our lives, and they will ebb and flow. At this very moment there are people here who are likely feeling thankful, just as there are those who are feeling lost. This Psalm does not deny that there are going to be challenging times in our lives. That people will sometimes be forced into a wilderness that is not of their own making— “the death of a spouse, the silent maze of Alzheimer’s, a partner’s abandonment, a child’s

shipping out to war, a sudden depression...” Sometimes we find ourselves in the middle of something and we don’t even know how we got there.

While that may be true, while terrible things can happen and our lives can change in an instant, we are also assured that God will hear our cries. That we are never left to face things alone. The Psalmist affirms that God will hear our cries, and even in the worst of the wilderness we will stumble onto the road that will take us to safety.

It is not an accident that this Psalm is paired with the reading in Hosea. As one theologian said, “At its core, this is one of the oldest stories there is. It first gets told in Genesis. It gets told in a thousand different ways throughout the pages of the Bible. God loves us, entirely. God creates us, delivers us, and tends us. The more God pursues, the more we turn away. It is the story of our shame. It is the story of God’s grace. We know how it ends—God does not give up. Our knowledge of the ending may dull our hearing to the retelling of grace that once amazed. Hosea does not tell; he shows. What he shows are portraits of a love whose beginnings we cannot remember and whose end echoes with the roar of transforming power.” This is the same love the Psalmist is talking about, it is the same love Jesus Christ came into the world to show us. A love that embraces lost sheep, and runaway children, and runaway prophets. Jonah got on a boat to outrun God and then sailed face first into God’s love and grace.

One of the biggest struggles in our faith is believing to the depths of our being that God loves us—and how that love transforms our lives. When we are sitting in what feels like a bottomless well of depression or fear, the notion of God's love is almost impossible to hold onto. When I was a teenager, I dealt with clinical depression. It felt impossible to function or feel hope. There were countless times when I wished I could feel the presence of God, and it just did not seem to exist. Where it is was hard to feel anything. God tells us to hold on. Even when you are in the wilderness, God is there, and you will find the road where you least expect it, and it will carry you home. Keep crying out in the wilderness.

When you feel the most lost and alone, don't be afraid to reach out to those around you either. One of the joys of our Christian faith is that we are a community who loves and supports one another and the world around us. As a community we are to reflect God's love into the world. The book of Hosea, and Psalms like we read today, the journey of Jesus to the cross, all of these things tell of the fierce love of God, who bends down and lifts us up. Sometimes it is easy to live the thankfulness of Psalm 107, and sometimes it is isn't. Together we do our best knowing that God sees us and holds us at our absolute worst, and our best. Hosea is not a biblical book for the faint of heart. In the most shocking way possible it tells a story of love and fidelity that boggles the mind but that is the point—we will never be out of reach of God's love.