

“Thankful for Steadfast Love”

Psalm 107:1-32, 43 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn

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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might recognize and give thanks for your steadfast love. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Psalm 107 may very well be my favorite psalm of thanksgiving. Like many psalms, it tells stories about God's saving acts. But it tells those stories in a beautifully structured liturgical format that draws us all into the telling. It feels like it was a group project created for a District Thanksgiving Service. The people come together “from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.” Perhaps, like here, we could imagine that those of us coming from the east were the ones who wandered in the desert, and those coming from the west were the ones trying to do “business on the mighty waters.” Every congregation gathered there selected a story to tell, a testimony to how God brought salvation in their time of trouble. In every situation, things got worse and worse, until they remembered to ‘cry to the Lord,’ who then rescued them.

Or maybe it's not a District Thanksgiving Service; maybe it's just a large group of family and friends gathered around a table, each person sharing what they are thankful for this year. As we tell those stories, we remind one another that we've come through hard times. And if there are those at the table currently in the midst of hard times, we tell those stories to help them believe hard times cannot last.

Each of these stories tells of different calamities, which is neatly reflected in each of the four concluding sentences that come after the response you read.

Wandering lost in the desert, rotting away in prison, ill to the verge of death, tossed at sea in a terrifying storm – these are all situations in which God taking your hand is a beautiful metaphor for deliverance. And holding onto God’s hand is, for me, a good way of understanding the theological concept at the center of this psalm. *Hesed*, the Hebrew word that is translated here as “steadfast love,” is the reason for our thanksgiving. These stories are trying to help us be wise, as the final verse implores, and “consider the steadfast love of the Lord.”

We don’t use the word “steadfast” all that often in everyday speech. I hope that’s not a reflection of not enough steadfast things in our life. But let’s stop and consider this word for a moment. Steadfast connects to steady; it connects to fasten, fastened, being firmly held. It makes me think about a trip we made to the ice skating rink at Kroc, years ago, with a bunch of little girls who’d never been on skates before. Normally, when you hold hands with someone, it’s a fairly flexible thing; your fingers can move around as needed for comfort, your arm is fairly loose. But when you’ve got an eight-year-old on either side, holding on for dear life, your arm needs to be firm, strong, reassuring, more like a safety bar than a limb; your grip must be steadfast. That is what it’s like to be held in the arms of God. The rest of our body may be flailing

around panicking, but if we remember to cry out to God, we can suddenly re-discover that our hand is held in the grip of Jesus, strong and gentle and firm. What a relief!

“Let those who are wise give heed to these things, and consider the steadfast love of the Lord,” the psalm concludes. So what do these stories teach us about *hesed*, the steadfast love of God? First of all, it’s clear that God’s love isn’t something we earn. We don’t buy it or win it or charm God into sharing it. We just ask, as desperately as we need to. We don’t even necessarily need to know what we’re asking for: “they cried to the Lord in their trouble,” it says in each story. It doesn’t say what they said, or if they even used words. Weeping in terror could be enough, if done in the general direction of God.

These stories make clear that God’s steadfast love isn’t something we can only receive if we deserve it. The middle two stories do not hesitate to let us know that the troubles these people were going through were their own fault. We may quibble with ancient explanations of illness as cosmic punishment for wrongdoing and the various systemic reasons why some people end up in prison and others don’t. But that doesn’t end up mattering in the end. The point is not who is to blame for the distress; the point is that when called upon, God delivers those in distress, regardless of whether they did it to themselves or not. That steady hand is there in the darkness of prison just as it’s there for someone going blind from glaucoma. That steady hand is holding onto the person struggling with a hangover just as surely as it’s holding someone

suffering from the nausea caused by chemotherapy. All the judgments we put on people about what they should have done differently, to give ourselves permission to ignore their distress and ration our compassion – all of that is nonsense from the perspective of God’s steadfast love. It is for all humankind, the deserving and the undeserving, the wise and the foolish, the just and the unjust. God’s steady hand is there, holding us in our distress, if we will only cry out and notice.

Now you can imagine that when these congregations came together from the four directions, each one of them chose a story to tell that was sufficiently dramatic for the occasion. The goal, after all, was to illustrate the power and depth of God’s steadfast love. But maybe your life hasn’t been full of potential shipwrecks or imprisonment recently. Can you still feel your need for that steady hand, or do we sometimes forget to give thanks when things are humming along just fine? I left out verses 33-42 from our reading of this psalm, but perhaps we should have included it, so that those who are “sowing fields and getting a fruitful yield” can also see themselves in this story. Sometimes God’s steadfast love is more like the steady ground under our feet, most often taken for granted, than it is like the strong hand holding us up on slippery ice. Even then, the psalm reminds us to “consider the steadfast love of God.” After all, once things have settled down is when we are most able to tell our stories of God’s deliverance, whether it was us personally or our ancestors who were brought out of distress.

Indeed, it is perhaps most important for us to tell the stories of how God held us close when our lives are calm and contented. For if we don't continually remind ourselves of the power of God's steadfast love in our lives, we can easily come to believe that we are where we are and we have what we have simply because of our own efforts and righteousness. Nothing is less faithful than declaring our blessings personal achievements or prizes. We may not understand why we have what we have when so many others don't. But we cannot allow ourselves to believe that means we are more worthy than those without, or we will miss the message of Christ completely.

To declare that God's steadfast love is for the deserving and the undeserving both is to admit that the line between those two groups is mostly imaginary. To declare that we earned the blessings we have is to proclaim our ignorance about how God's love works. This is why we tell these stories to one another, and it's why we need to keep telling more and more stories, dramatic stories and subtle stories. Stories of how God drew life out of the jaws of death, and stories of how God's truth can dawn gradually in the hearts of those who are complacent. We need to tell all the stories that call our souls into thanksgiving and praise. We need to tell all the stories that help us consider the steadfast love of God and remember that it never lets us go. Let us give thanks to God, for God is good; God's steadfast love endures forever. Hallelujah and Amen!