

Kerrisdale Presbyterian Church
 "Steadfast Love"

Scripture: Psalm 107; Luke 17:11-19 or Judges 8:29-35

Hymns: God is love: come heaven, adoring 314; The steadfast love of the Lord 20
 (2/3/4); Lift up your hearts/Sing Hallelujah 526; Eat this bread 527; Guide me, O thou
 great Redeemer 651

March 6, 2016

COMMUNION SUNDAY/AGM

Rev. Steve Filyk

An elderly couple was having dinner at their friend's house,
 and after eating, the wives left the table and went into the kitchen.

The two gentlemen continued talking, and one boasted,
 "Last night we went out to a fantastic new restaurant.
 I would recommend it very highly."

"What is the name of the restaurant?" the other man asked.

The first man thought and thought and finally asked
 "What is the name of that flower
 you give to someone you love?
 You know... The one that's red and has thorns."

"Do you mean a rose?"

"Yes, that's the one," the man replied.
 Then turning towards the kitchen he shouted,
 "Rose, what's the name of that restaurant
 we went to last night?"

We all have problems with our memory.
 It's not just the seniors.
 I would hate to add up
 The time I spend every week
 Looking for my keys, my wallet, or my gloves.

Sometimes the things we forget don't matter.
 Sometimes the things we forget are pretty important.
 One of the challenges for God's people
 Is to remember the love and the care
 We have received from our God.

Today we end our expedition into the psalms
 With an exploration of psalm 107.
 Psalm 107 has been identified
 as a community psalm of thanksgiving.

Unlike other psalms where God is offered generic praise,
 In this psalm the "speaker identifies a particular,
 nameable gift from God
 for which gratitude is voiced."

Please turn with me to page 559 in your pew Bibles.
 I want to spend just a couple moments
 Looking at the psalm's structure.

Psalm 107 on page 559.

What you'll notice
 Is that after an introductory summons to thanks (verses 1-3)
 We are offered four case studies
 in divine deliverance (verses 4-32).

We are told about a group of wanderers
 who are led to their destination,
 We are told about a group of prisoners
 Who are set free,

We are told about a company
 Of sick persons, literally 'fools'
 Who are healed.

And we are told about a shipload of sailors
 Who are rescued from the stormy seas.

Each vignette follows the same pattern.

There is a description of distress,
 A prayer to the lord,
 Details of the deliverance,
 And an expression of thanks.

The psalm then closes (verses 33-43)
 With a summary reflection on God's generous governance.ⁱⁱ

It's a long piece of poetry,
 Which for me begs the question:
 "Why does the psalmist go to trouble
 Of creating such an epic?"
 Why share this assortment of testimonies?
 Why offer these repeated calls to give thanks?

Maybe he was commissioned to write
 A certain number of lines;
 He was just filling in all the blank spaces.

And maybe he was offering his best efforts
 To remind his reader's
 Of our own experiences of God's power and love.

The truth is that in seasons of strength
 We tend to forget earlier episodes of neediness:
 Those times when we cried out to God
 And received just what we needed.

None of us enjoy suffering
 So we do our best to forget about it.
 And since our culture values autonomy and independence,
 We construct facades of self-sufficiency.

But when we bury
 our stories of weakness,
 We forget those moments of God's intervention.

Of course it's not just in seasons of strength
 That we struggle with amnesia.
 In seasons of weakness
 We begin to doubt God's goodness and care.

When we suffer
 We start wondering if God really is all-powerful.
 If we spend more than an hour in any desperate situation
 We start thinking God doesn't care.

The psalmist seems to know this:
 Our faith is challenged
 Both in times of strength and weakness.

His solution is to hammer us with different stories
 Of God's powerful redemption
 Of God's faithful care.

Imagine with me...

He enrolled in the school
 Even though he had no real sense of purpose.
 Over the next few years he moved through departments and
 faculties.
 first engineering, then sciences,
 finally graduating with a degree in psychology.

Of course this big adventure didn't make him any more employable.
 Rent was tough and soon there were student loan payments.
 At one point he was working three jobs
 To cover it all.

He cried out to God,
 Despairing of his situation.

And then one day a friend suggested he check out a nursing program.
 He filled out an application and to his great surprise he got in.
 Now he's taking classes, living nearby with his grandma.
 The future is alive with possibilities.

“Some wandered in desert wastes,
 finding no way to an inhabited town;
 hungry and thirsty,
 their soul fainted within them.

Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
 and he delivered them from their distress;
 he led them by a straight way,
 until they reached an inhabited town.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Or how about this...

He used drugs casually,
 Only the soft stuff.
 But it was the weekend and nothing was happening,
 And he was bored and curious.

Once he had a taste he couldn't get enough of it.
 Pretty soon he had emptied his bank account
 And borrowed his last dollar.

He was left unemployed, homeless, and friendless.
 He had no place to turn.
 He called out to God as he slipped in the needle.

Waking up, he was surprised to find himself alive, and in the hospital.
 While there he learned about a program
 That would provide food and shelter
 and supportive counselling:
 A way to climb out of this mess.

“Some sat in darkness and in gloom,
 prisoners in misery and in irons,
 for they had rebelled against the words of God,
 and spurned the counsel of the Most High.

Their hearts were bowed down with hard labour;
 they fell down, with no one to help.
 Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
 and he saved them from their distress;

he brought them out of darkness and gloom,
 and broke their bonds asunder.”^{iv}

Or how about this...

She sat with her husband
 staring at the pile of bills on the table.
 They didn't have this problem before
 But with the new house came new expenses

And they hadn't given up
 The lifestyle there were accustomed to.

But now their cards were maxed out
 And the banks wouldn't give another extension on their credit.

They called out to God
 Looking for an answer.

She approached her mom,
 Hoping for an advance on her inheritance,
 But what she was given
 Was the number for a financial counsellor instead.

He told them if they made some changes
 They wouldn't lose everything.
 Today they would be going through bills
 and talking about priorities—an important start.

“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.”^v

Or how about this...

They were an aging congregation
In the middle of a rapidly changing world.

There had been a time
When all they had to do
Was open their doors
And the people piled in for worship.

Volunteers were so plentiful
That some were even turned away!

But now few dared enter those doors.
And everyone seemed busy or uninterested.
Now just keeping the lights on
Was starting to be a struggle.

So they cried to the Lord,
They turned to God for rescue.

Some newcomers arrived and started asking
If they could do things a little differently.
Long-time members started talking about taking chances,
Running experiments, reaching out into the community.

Sometimes it felt like all their treasures
Were being thrown overboard.
But even with a smaller crew, on this rough sea,
The boat was keeping afloat.

"Some went down to the sea in ships,
doing business on the mighty waters;
they saw the deeds of the Lord,
his wondrous works in the deep.
For he commanded and raised the stormy wind,
which lifted up the waves of the sea.

They mounted up to heaven, they went down to the depths;
their courage melted away in their calamity;
they reeled and staggered like drunkards,
and were at their wits' end.

Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
and he brought them out from their distress;
he made the storm be still...^{vi}

I think we can all identify with at least one of these stories.
While we like to think of ourselves as strong and independent,
We have all faced overwhelming challenges.
We have all called out to God,
And experienced God's saving power.

The psalmist calls us to remember this past,
So that we might joyfully praise God in the present.
And so we might welcome every good gift
That is just around the corner.

As I was reading through the commentaries
I ran across a story about a communion service like ours
in a community much like own:

an affluent suburb where everyone drove nice cars,
Sent their kids to good schools,
And seemed by every measure to be successful.

The commentator noted how in this community
"One dear man was [a very public] exception:
his business had failed, his wife had left him,
and his daughter had died tragically in her twenties.

[This man] reminded [the commentator] of the saying
"If it weren't for bad luck, I would have no luck at all."

Still, he was a faithful member of the church,
so when [the commentator] invited people to come forward
and receive the sacrament, Bob was first in line.

"This is the bread of heaven and the cup of salvation, given for you,"
[the commentator] intoned, as [Bob] dipped his bread in the wine.

Then he popped it in his mouth,
smiled broadly,
and said, "Don't I know it!"^{vii}

ⁱ Walter Brueggemann & Walter Bellinger Jr. *Psalms* 464

ⁱⁱ See Walter Brueggemann & Walter Bellinger Jr. *Psalms* 464 and Nancy L. deClaissee-Walford "Psalm 107" *Psalms for Preaching and Worship* 281

ⁱⁱⁱ Psalm 107:4-7 NRSV

^{iv} Psalm 107:10-14 NRSV

May we keep at the forefront of our memory
The goodness that God has shown us.
And let us thank the Lord for his steadfast love.

Amen.

^v Psalm 107:17-20 NRSV

^{vi} Psalm 107:23-29 NRSV

^{vii} Shawnthea Monroe "Psalm 107, Pastoral Perspective" *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ)*.