

God's Steadfast Love
A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Wm. D. Peterson
Coeur d'Alene First Presbyterian Church
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Text: Psalm 40:1-11

¹ I waited patiently for the LORD; he inclined to me and heard my cry.

² He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure.

³ He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the LORD.

⁴ Happy are those who make the LORD their trust, who do not turn to the proud, to those who go astray after false gods.

⁵ You have multiplied, O LORD my God, your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward us; none can compare with you. Were I to proclaim and tell of them, they would be more than can be counted.

⁶ Sacrifice and offering you do not desire, but you have given me an open ear. Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required.

⁷ Then I said, "Here I am; in the scroll of the book it is written of me." ⁸ I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart."

⁹ I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation; see, I have not restrained my lips, as you know, O LORD.

¹⁰ I have not hidden your saving help within my heart, I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation, I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness from the great congregation.

¹¹ Do not, O LORD, withhold your mercy from me; let your steadfast love and faithfulness keep me safe forever.

The Sermon

If you've had the opportunity to watch a toddler work a room – either a toddler who is your own or not – you'll typically see a characteristic pattern. Toddlers are by nature explorers; they are seeking to learn more and more about the world in which they live.

But toddlers are also still young children wanting to know that their exploration is taking place in a context where they still have access to a secure safe person, object, or setting, rather than just being "out there on their own. Thus you'll observe the toddler risking going to another safe-looking person – but only for so long -- before needing to go back and grab on to Mom's, Dad's, or a care provider's leg. Should the safe person have moved out of the toddler's site, and panic sets in.

As we all know, however, Mom, Dad and other care-providers can't be present – nor should they – all the time, so there is a weaning process for both parent and child regarding how much safety and security over how long a period can be

tolerated on either the parent's or the child's part.

This dance happens in one way or another every day for child care providers in settings such as Glory Be, or each Sunday in the Nursery, but the reality is that often times it is not the child's sense of security that is at stake, it is also that of whether or not Mom, Dad, Grandma, Grandpa, or whomever can let go.

It is not good for the emotional health or development of a child to experience parents or other care-givers who are either so attached that there is what is called enmeshment and the lines become blurred as to who is who in the relationship; just as it is not good when there is such detachment that the child has no sense that she or he even matters to the other except as an unwanted obligation.

The analogy is not perfect, but I believe it fair to say that these realities of human nature and human development have parallels in our relationship (or not) to God when God is imaged as a heavenly parent. Scripture is full of times when God has to wean Israel from its dependency and let the so-called Children of Israel figure things out for themselves, and other times when God had to intervene to gain Israel's attention once again.

Not unlike in the human parenting relationships, we who are God's children are prone to either become so dependent on God that we lose all sense of self, contrasted by times when we believe we've "done it all by myself", and have to be reminded that there might well have been some Divine intervention in there.

Maybe it's okay that we waffle like this – prayerfully and hopefully it is because it's how so many of us behave in our relationship to God –but only in the context of realizing we've got to figure some things out before it is too late.

In this regard, I liked the approach modeled by the professor for my seminary course in Hebrew. On the first day of class Dr. March told us: "My responsibility is to tell those who will decide whether or not you are qualified for ordination that you do – or that you don't – have the capacity to read and translate the Hebrew language of the Old Testament. Some of you will demonstrate that you do in the first days and weeks of this class. That's fine. Others of you won't get it until near the end of class, but your final grade will still be as high as those who got Hebrew from the start. Now, if you are one of those who doesn't get it at the start, and still hasn't gotten it at the end, I'll be seeing you again next semester."

Being one of those for whom it took a heck of a long time to get Hebrew, I was so thankful for Dr. March's perspective on his role.

I also tend to think that not only because he was and remains a “godly man,” Dr. March reflects something of the nature of God. God sticks with us until we get it and, because God doesn’t have to answer to a national denomination’s office related to ordination, the Bible suggests that God might even give a pass to those of us who never quite get what this salvation business is all about.

At least that seems to be the clear message of the biblical story of God’s relationship with Israel.

He chose to redeem a people enslaved in Egypt who apparently had forgotten long ago – if they ever knew it – that they were the heirs of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It wasn’t only Pharaoh who had forgotten that there once had been a Hebrew man named Joseph who had helped save Egypt during a drought; the people had forgotten it too.

But the primal story of the people of Israel, and a story that is our primal story as well as heirs adopted into God’s family, is that when the slaves in Egypt groaned, God heard their cry and through God’s chosen prophet Moses demanded that Pharaoh “let My (i.e., God’s) people go!”

Over the centuries of the life of the people of Israel, and as the form of communication we know as the psalms (which means hymns) were written, they still used the old, old story to shape their praise, and their laments.

So we read in many Psalms the pattern:

The Psalmist “cried,”
God “heard” the cry and answered,
and the Psalmist moved to praise.

See the rhythm that is repeated over and over in the Psalms?

The Psalmist brings her or his individual, or the peoples’ collective lament (often voiced as a plea to be released from the pit of death or the miry bog), attentive listening and waiting for God’s action or response follows, and the Psalmist moves to doxology, which means to “praise” from the Greek word doxos.

If you wonder how the pattern of the Psalms could so consistently model the pattern of the Exodus story even though centuries had passed, it was because the people of Israel – sometimes faithfully, but often times not – kept the story alive or renewed it through worship and ritual.

In homes of faithful Jews, every Friday as the sun sets and another Sabbath begins, the story of God’s steadfast love is shared by the family in the rituals that mark this sacred time. Hear it week after week after week, and it

becomes embedded deep in your heart, even if there are times when Jewish youth and their elders are not as observant as at other times.

I believe that is one reason most Christian churches are packed on Christmas Eve and on Easter Sunday, so that people can be reminded of the story of Jesus birth, and of his Resurrection as the Risen Lord. The stories, the rituals, at least are minimally sustaining and consoling, even if many of us would wish such folk would also be present in worship at other times and in other seasons.

Children thrive on routine – even adult children.

Have you noticed how when your children come home for Thanksgiving or Christmas they turn into rabid fundamentalists – not religiously necessarily – but in wanting everything in their house and in the way the meal is shared, gifts are opened, etc., to be “just as they remember it?”

The rest of the year they can be loosey goosey, and their lives may reflect few if any of the values you hoped to instill in them as they grew up, but at those times when they are home for holidays, they want tradition with a capital “T”.

That’s what makes God’s “steadfast love” (the Hebrew word for steadfast is *hesed*) so important. The people of Israel knew they were messed up and in deep trouble, but they at least – or especially – could rely on God’s steadfastness. And what a gift on which to rely.

So, when you pray, feel free to cry out.

But don’t stop there – wait expectantly – wait with conviction that you will at some point be moving to praise, because God’s steadfast love can be counted on.

Thanks be to God.