

God's Steadfast Love Endures Forever

Palm Sunday 2018

Psalm 118: 1-2, 19-29; Mark 11:1-11

Rev. Shannon White

Wilton Presbyterian Church

God's Steadfast Love endures forever.

We read it in our Psalm this morning. Perhaps it rolled easily off our tongues, but what does it really mean to you and to me? Do we really believe it? Have we experienced it? And are we actually used in this life to help make that a reality for others?

A friend of mine from back in my news days shared a story this week by a friend of his who lives in Philly:

Tonight at precisely #1111 pm I saved a man's life from jumping in front of a speeding train. I'm so happy that god and/or the universe synchronized our paths so that man can have more time here with us. I jumped from the car and was with him in what seemed like nano seconds. I grabbed him as he went toward the tracks, train horn blaring, lights flashing and put my arm around his shoulder tight like a friend and changed his direction, he said who are you?, as he tried to spin around and go back, I said I'm Nat, what's your name? We walked shoulder to shoulder with my arm around him as if he were my best friend. I felt his guard release and him relax into my arms. He said I'm done with it all, I said well god doesn't think so, he said how do you know, and I said because he put me here to stop you and to prove to you that he hears you and is here for you. He burst into tears and we sat on a bench and talked the whole time while waiting for the police to arrive and I didn't let go of him once. He talked, I listened with me only saying things out of love and kindness. The police arrived and pulled me aside and he began shouting over and over "I want him to stay, I want him to stay!"

Today was the best day of my life. Not because it had anything to do with me, but because God had me do so much for another man.

Thanks to my twin Danielle for listening to me and turning the car around. We did it sis! We saved him. Nathaniel Schwartztrauber posted on FB at 12:47am

God's Steadfast Love Endures Forever.

The entirety of psalm 118 hinges on this characteristic activity of God of hearing and answering the cries of God's people, turning mourning into dancing, and the night into day. This is Israel's most foundational experience of God. The Israelites groaned under their slavery and hearing their groaning, God brought them out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage (Exodus 2:23b-24). In fact, Psalm 118 is the last psalm in a group of six psalms in Book Five known as the "the Egyptian Hallel" (Psalms 113-118). These are the psalms that are used in present-day Jewish life at the Passover meal on the eighth day of their annual spring celebration, which begins this year on this

coming Friday and ends on April 6th. Passover, of course, gets its name from the celebration of the passing over of the spirit of death when God's plagues visited the houses in Egypt during their enslavement, killing all firstborns.

The language of Psalm 118 taps into this defining story of Israel's life with God, extolling God's power that can overcome even the most menacing and threatening forces of our world.

Four times at the beginning of the psalm and one time at the end, the psalmist calls the community of faith to praise God for God's steadfast love. It is indeed God's covenant loyalty, God's unwavering commitment to God's people and God's world that compels God to act for the sake of the people, even at God's own expense.

Throughout Lent, our passages from the Hebrew Scriptures have focused on the instances when God made covenants with God's people: We read the story of Noah, and God's promise and covenant to never again wipe out creation; We read the story of Abram and Sarai who were called to leave their homeland and that they would be the father and mother of blessed people for generations to come. Their new names of Abraham and Sarah would reflect that new call. We read last week in Jeremiah that God would change the covenant from an external one to an internal one, writing the covenant of God's love on each of our hearts. Today, we go levels deeper than that and hear the results which having the love of God written on our hearts produces.

"Give thanks to YHWH who is good, because God's chesed is for 'olam.'" The NRSV, the version we read, translates chesed as "steadfast love," but some scholars suggest that the idea goes deeper and should be read as "unbreakable love/connection," suggesting that there is finally nothing you and I can do to stop YHWH from seeking connection with us. It might be said that this idea is bedrock for an Israelite understanding of who YHWH is. And that reality implies that such chesed, by its very nature, will continue "forever," as most translations have it, though the word, 'olam, has at times a more complex meaning than that. In any case, the poem begins and ends with that famous conviction, as must all talk of Hebrew theology. (Textweek.com)

So... God's unbreakable love and connection will continue forever...

Psalm 118 is a theological summary of how YHWH relates to YHWH's people, as well as a summons to those people to praise the YHWH who creates and saves them and will continue to love them into all the future there is for them....even through despair.

(Read more at <http://www.patheos.com/progressive-christian/theologys-greatest-hits-john-c-holbert-03-23-15#yGZeSjekAOOBGHvJ.99>)

Brynn and Cassie were the best of friends. As young moms in Washington State, their friendship had spanned some 11 years on the day their lives would be changed forever.

Although the two lived around 6 miles apart, they were constantly over at each others' houses. Their toddlers were friends and even attended the same preschool. They also each had a younger child.

On that September morning back in 2014, Cassie drove with her son, Easton, over to pick up Brynn's son, Wyatt, before heading on to work. It was not a good morning for Wyatt. He was in the middle of a temper tantrum and when Cassie drove up, Wyatt ran back in the house wailing the whole way. Brynn's 17 month old, Rowyn, ran out to say hello in her turquoise and white polka-dot jammies. Cassie gave her a squeeze on the chin the way she always did—she adored the exuberant girl with her blond curls. The chaos continued until Wyatt, still in tears, was finally buckled in next to Easton. "We can go now; he'll be OK once we're on our way," Cassie reassured her friend as she climbed back into the Highlander. Brynn stood outside the house in her white bathrobe and waved goodbye.

It was 8:18 A.M. when Cassie put the car in drive, relieved to be getting underway. Then, as she rolled forward, she felt a bump. "We both locked eyes in the rearview mirror," says Brynn. Their worst gut reaction was true. The bump was Rowyn.

Neither of them knows how Rowyn got under the car. She'd been several feet away when Cassie last saw her. Brynn thought she was still in the house. But when the two friends realized she'd been hit, Brynn scooped her up off the gravel. One gave cpr while the other called 911. Hysterically crying, Brynn ran in to get her husband.

As first responders arrived on the scene (the two young boys still in the car), Cassie and Brynn found themselves sitting huddled on the grass, clutching each other. "We just need to pray for a miracle," they both recall Brynn saying. And they did. They were still together when a firefighter came over and told them that Rowyn was gone. "We were just like, 'No, no, no,'" Brynn remembers. "And I told Cassie right off the bat, 'Don't blame yourself. It's not your fault.'"

Of course the shock and disbelief set in. Both wanted the reality not to be true. Over the next week, both dealt with the loss individually. A pastor whom Brynn and her husband didn't know stopped by to visit with her. He had lost his own child years before. They talked and cried. Friends checked in on Cassie as well, thinking her guilt might lead her to harm herself. The two women kept in touch through texts that week. Even though Brynn reassured her friend that she didn't blame her, Cassie was convinced she'd change her mind; "I knew that grief has many stages," she says.

Brynn could sense Cassie's doubt and on Friday she decided to visit Brynn in person with her husband, Cody. Cassie was nervous. She made sure her car was out of the driveway so it wouldn't traumatize them. "I didn't want her seeing me because I felt like it would be so painful," she says. But Brynn wasn't having it. "I went in, took her hand, and told her, 'I don't understand it myself, but I love you more now than I did before. If it was anyone else, I would have gotten my gun and killed them. I'm glad it was you because I know how much you loved my daughter. It's just a terrible, terrible accident that we both have to live with the rest of our lives. And we can get through this if we do it together.'" Cody embraced her too. "It was very close. It was very comforting," says Cassie. "I still felt like they were just in shock and would change their minds with time. But their kindness was unbelievable. There are just no words to really describe how

much grace I felt at that time.” (‘I Accidentally Killed My Best Friend’s Daughter’—How Two Women Recovered From the Worst Pain Imaginable” Glamour Magazine)

The article goes on to chronicle what it was like over the next three years, how, after a time apart to grieve, they returned to the friendship. They started a foundation together to leverage their grief and help others in similar situations, how they both sought individual help in therapy and groups...to heal together and individually.

“If Brynn and her family had blamed me,” she says, “I would likely not be alive today. I am incredibly grateful for their forgiveness, and I’m incredibly sorry for the accident. My heart and mind will struggle with this reality until the day that I die.”

God’s love does not remove us from the extremely painful events which we experience. But God’s unbreakable love and connection remains intact with us through it all. We are not alone. God’s love endures forever is not a statement of hope, but one of reality based on the history of God’s restorative acts in the world with God’s people.

As Rolf Jacobson notes in his article, *The Costly Loss of Praise*, “Praise is not simply an act of piety, but a polemical and political assertion. Praise evokes a worldview, one in which God is an active agent in daily life. In other words, praise declares, in the face of alternative conceptions of reality, that the source of Israel’s salvation and the hope for the world is God and God alone.”

In the context of Palm Sunday at the start of Holy Week, praise is particularly crucial. For ours is a world which increasingly looks for salvation by blaming others, by protecting ourselves at all costs, by being fearful of those who think and look differently than we do, by hoarding resources. It is ours, then, as the people of God to posit an alternative way forward rooted in the hope we have in Jesus the Christ, to assert that we live in a world where resurrections happen. That God really is on the move, redeeming and restoring the world to Godself.. That Christ really did inaugurate a kingdom that has taken root in our hearts and that compels us to new ways of being and behaving characterized by justice, righteousness, and shalom. Ours is the task of directing people’s attention once again to the God who loves us, whose unbreakable love/connection endures forever, who is at work in our lives and in our world making all things new, who alone is our hope and our salvation.

God’s steadfast Love Endures Forever!

Thanks be the God!!