God’s Steadfast Love

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost 2019

Psalm 136:1-9

*God’s faithful love lasts forever.*

*Psalm 136, the repeated refrain*

As you may or may not know, the Book of Psalms served as the hymnbook of the Jewish people. The Jews sang from it, much like we sing from our hymnal. King David is credited for many of the psalms, and it is no surprise, since he was supposedly a talented musician as well as a mighty warrior and great king. Some of the psalms are quiet and serene, like that most beloved Shepherd’s Psalm, *The Lord is my shepherd, . . .* some are majestic and soaring, like Psalm 121: *I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence my help comes. . .* Others struggle with God and our relationship with God, like the one Jesus recalls on the cross, Psalm 22: *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* The psalms run the full gamut of human emotions, from the lowest low to the highest high. That’s why many Jews and Christians turn to the psalms when they find themselves in various points along life’s journey.

Today, as we worship in this most beautiful of settings, we are led to give thanks to God and our spiritual ancestors for this amazing gift in which we are privileged to worship in each and every Sunday. As I consider what an extraordinary gift we have been given, I am moved to think what does stewardship of this place mean for us as we move forward in these challenging times? What is God calling us to be and do, not to exploit this gift, but to use for the glory of God?

It is no big secret that such visioning is not just important in these critical times, it is mandatory. Josh Hayashi, whom many of you heard a couple of Sundays ago, through his informed assessment of where we are, concluded that, if we proceed with business as usual, we have seven more Pentecosts, seven more Christmases, seven more Easters, before we close the doors of the church for good. That’s a sobering thought, isn’t it? I, for one, am not willing to let that possibility come to pass without my best effort. But back to the psalm.

The songwriter begins in the first stanza with praise for God’s marvelous work of creation. He gives thanks for the skies, the seas, the sun, moon and stars that light the skies. It is beautiful, but it is like a lot of what all people, Christians, Jews, Muslims, all religions, give thanks to the Creator.

But then, on the second stanza of the hymn, the psalmist switches gears. Yes, he sings, God the Creator has blessed us with this marvelous work of creation. But guess what? The awesome God who created the majesty of the universe, that same God, watches over us. In another psalm, the composer asks: *When I look at the heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?” [Psalm 8:3-4]* The same Creator God who hung the stars, made the sun to shine by day and the moon by night, that same awesome God, cares for, loves, and watches over you and me.

This is not some vague, abstract concept of our theology. In the second part of the psalm, he recites for his hearers just how God’s love is made concrete in specific ways. In particular, he asks the Hebrew people to consider how God led them out of slavery in Egypt and into the land he promised to them. One by one, he recites how God actualized love all along the way, from the plagues in Egypt, to the parting of the Red Sea, to the provision for their hunger in the wilderness, to protection against hostile armies. God loved them, protected them, cared for their needs. This is not some abstraction. God loved them.

In that most beloved hymn, John Newton wrote for his generation:

*Through many dangers, toils, and snares,*

*We have already come;*

*Tis grace has led us safe thus far,*

*And grace will lead us home.*

Earlier, I spoke about the challenging times we are going through as a congregation. Yes, we need to face them with an unrelenting realism. We cannot wish these challenges away. Remember the Stockdale Principle I share a few weeks ago? We will have to work through them. But do you know what? Just like Stockdale in the Vietnamese prison, we need to be brutally realistic, but also people of faith, trusting that God has made us for such a time as this, and God will not abandon us. We as a people have face difficulties before. I am sure our forebears in this congregation have thought, *how will we make it through these moments?* But God was with them then, and God is with us now. Tis grace has led us safe thus far, and grace will lead us home.

Paul Osumi, one of my beloved predecessors, told me on one occasion of the transition from the old site of the sanctuary to our present location. The old site, you remember, was on Nuuanu Ave, across from the old Chun Hoon market. The church had outgrown the facilities, parking was a challenge, and they knew they had to find some other location into which they could grow. When these two lots on which we are presently located became available, Osumi approached the leadership about obtaining this property. They resisted. One person seriously advocated, “We don’t want to move into the country.” Paul said he was serious. For a congregation made up of mostly very conservative business types, it proposed moving out of their comfort zone. But they stepped forward in faith eventually. And here we are. God has led us safe thus far, and God will lead us home.

Brothers and sisters, we are called to step out in faith. Our future depends on it. God may not be asking us to spend forty years wandering in the desert. Heck, God may not even be asking us to move a mile up the Pali. But God is asking us to risk being bold, not out of desperation, but out of faith. And through it all, we can be assured: the steadfast love of God lasts forever.