

## “SUMMER PSALMS” part 6

Psalm 136

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I realized I had been watching TV more than usual a couple of weeks ago when I found myself humming the song “Time after Time.” - repeatedly, for days on end. It’s a Cyndi Lauper song (going all the way back, interestingly enough, to the year I graduated from high school) ... but these days it’s the soundtrack of a McDonald’s commercial. A cute McDonald’s commercial, but still. They aired it quite frequently during the Olympics, and the song got stuck in my head. As “earworms” go, it’s not bad. In fact, I like the song a lot, even after having it follow me around for three weeks. That’s not usually how it goes though, is it? The songs we can’t get out of our heads are more often annoying, sing-songy, repetitive snippets of music that drive us crazy - commercial jingles, overplayed pop tunes, pieces the budding musicians in our houses have been practicing for hours on end, or music somebody nearby likes just a little too much. Insidious melodies and usually words that are silly at best. Quite often, less than edifying and not really what we want replaying in our minds, over and over. It’s too bad this phenomenon doesn’t happen more often with music that inspires us, grounds us, and makes us think about stuff that really matters.

“For God’s steadfast love endures forever.”

I wonder if the ancient Israelites who sang the refrain on Psalm 136 left the temple with those words reverberating through their minds. You could probably tell from our reading that it is really a song, and that the worshippers would have sung the part that we read together. Over and over. 26 times. It must have stuck with them for at least the next few days, don’t you think?

26 times repeating the same line of a call and response song (or of a spoken litany, even) may seem like a lot, or it does when you are singing it or saying it. But that’s kind of the point. This psalm is about the steadfast love of God, and the evidence for it in the world and in our lives ... and the psalm writer is making the point that there IS a lot to say on this topic.

“For God’s steadfast love endures forever.”

As I said, there are 26 lines, and the second half of each line is the same.

The first three lines are kind of like a repeated call to worship, with God named in a different way in each line: “Lord,” “God of Gods,” “Lord of Lords.” Repetition like this – an idea restated in slightly different words – is typical of Hebrew poetry. The fact that the invitation is repeated not once but twice signals the importance the writer wants to give it.

“For God’s steadfast love endures forever.”

Verse 4 tell us the subject of the body of this hymn of praise; the wonders of the Lord, *pele*, in Hebrew, meaning “mighty doings.” Events so marvelous and out of the ordinary that we can only think of them as happening through divine power and purpose. (Mays, p. 419)

And verses 5 – 25 are a recitation of those wonders:

First, some of the wonders of creation:  
Making the heavens  
Shaping the earth  
Lighting the sky with sun and moon and stars.

Then, wonders relating to specific events in the history of Israel:  
Defeating the Egyptians and freeing God's people from slavery  
Bringing the people through the Red Sea  
Leading them in the wilderness  
Defeating their enemies  
And giving them a land

And finally, two more general wonders;  
God "remembered us" when we were down ("humiliated" is the way one version translates it).  
and  
God gives the gift of food to all people.

The final line of the psalm is an echo of the first few lines  
... leaving us, or sending us off, with one more exhortation to "give thanks."

"O give thanks to the God of heaven, For his steadfast love endures forever."

The most important word in these verses is, of course, *hesed*, "steadfast love" We have encountered this word before in our reflections on the psalms. You might remember, in fact, that Psalm 107, which we read a few weeks ago, begins with almost exactly the same words Psalm 136 begins and ends with. Psalm 107 also features a recital of God's deeds of power and faithfulness on behalf of the people (although without the many-times-repeated refrain). Other psalms are similar. Remembering God's faithful acts is a hallmark of the worship life of God's people.

This is every bit as true for Christians as it was for the ancient Israelites.

That's exactly what we are doing when we gather at the table for communion, for example. When we give thanks before we break the bread, we remember some of the same things the psalm writers remember: God's amazing creation, God's faithful love of wayward people, God's call to freedom and justice, God's compassion for the hurting, God's generosity.

And as we share the bread and the juice, we are remembering God's presence with us in Jesus - his words, his compassionate life, his sacrificial love, his transcendence of hate and violence and death. And we also remember how God feeds us, physically and spiritually, how we are united in community, what we are called to be and do in the world, and the hope we have in Jesus Christ.

I don't know whether the ancient people of Israel had those among or around them who doubted the truth of God's *hesed*. Probably they did. We know that we do. Sometimes we ourselves are those people. "Look at all the terrible things that happen," someone will say. "How can this be true about God's steadfast love?"

One of the reasons I had us read the whole of Psalm 136 was so we could see that our scriptures are not naïve about the state of the world. You can get that impression when you only read, say, the first few verses of this Psalm. Extracting inspirational nuggets from the Bible does tend to paint

a falsely sentimental picture of faith. But the worshippers who sang the psalms were recalling hard times, oppression, struggle, loss, calamity, and even periods in their collective life of which they weren't proud. They knew they were broken people in a broken world, they knew that trouble and sorrow were inevitable in life; they knew that along with freedom comes choices that cause pain; they knew that death comes to everyone.

And yet at the same time, they could see the beauty and mystery of a universe that couldn't be accidental; they had been given an understanding what goodness and justice and faithfulness looked like; they had been shaped into a community; they had come through things they didn't think they'd survive; and they had felt themselves accompanied through it all by God's presence. The refrain of Psalm 136 is really the refrain of their whole lives:

"God's steadfast love endures forever."

We may not *feel* the truth of it in every moment, but whether we are confident of it or whether our faith is shaky, this is the credo, the "I believe," that undergirds *our* lives, too:

"God's steadfast love endures forever."

This psalm offers a soundtrack of our lives, for the good days and the bad days, for the seasons of joy and abundance and the seasons of despair and need. Sing it in the shower, listen for when you are awake in the night, hum it on your way to work, pay attention and you'll hear it in a quiet moment, and you'll hear it from someone else, make an effort to call it to mind when you are struggling, join the song whenever you hear it, move to the rhythm of the refrain:

"God's steadfast love endures forever."

Resources:

*The Psalms*, by Artur Weiser

*Psalms* (Interpretation Commentary) by James L. Mays