

“SUMMER PSALMS, part 3”

Psalm 107: 1-3, 23-43

August 14, 2016 – Rev. Jerry Duggins

“Remember... Give thanks to God.... and... Tell.” I love this little summary of this psalm which Janet concluded with last week. “Remember the steadfast love of God that sustains you.... Cultivate gratitude, practice praise.... [and] bear witness to the steadfast love of God....” This message is reinforced in the verses we read this morning.

Verse 23 begins the fourth story of deliverance in the psalm. Last week, we read about deliverance from wandering in the desert, from the darkness of prison, and from the distress of illness. Today, we read about deliverance from the perils of the sea. “Some went down to the sea in ships....” The previous stories detail circumstances in which “some” happened to find themselves. They happened to be wandering in the desert, happened to find themselves in prison, and happened to be ill. Though there are indications that they may have been responsible for their trouble, none of these people would have sought out this trouble. But in the fourth story, there is a clear intention to sail. They sought out the sea.

Sometimes trouble finds us and sometimes we find it. The pattern of deliverance is the same. When trouble happens the people cry out to the Lord, God responds by leading them to a safe place and then they are urged to thank the Lord for God’s steadfast love. But this last story begins with some who are just doing what they’re supposed to be doing: conducting business.

You may recall the man who upon finishing his business in Jerusalem, took the road to Jericho only to be set upon by robbers and left for dead. Deliverance was a little slow that day because the Levite and the priest whom God had sent didn’t want any part of that trouble. But the Samaritan understood well enough what God would have wanted him to do.

If you fish for a living, most days you go down to the pier, get on a boat, and set out to sea. Sometime you’re going to misread the signs or rely too heavily on the local weather report and find yourself in the midst of a storm.

Or you’re a student, and one day on your way to school you encounter the class bully...

Or your supervisor at work is looking for a scapegoat...

Or you’re on your way to the food pantry and someone runs a red light....

Sometimes we find trouble, even make our own trouble and sometimes trouble finds us even when we’re doing what we’re supposed to. More than once Paul talks about

suffering for doing the right. Ask anyone working in advocacy for marginalized groups about the trouble one finds in doing the right thing.

This is Israel's history: deliverance from one trouble after another: Joseph rises from slave to the chief administrator in Egypt, leading his brothers to finding relief from famine from the one man they had wronged most. Moses leads the people out of slavery in Egypt and subsequently God delivers them from Pharaoh's army at the Red Sea, from hunger and thirst in the wilderness, from a host of enemies in the Promised Land. Daniel is delivered from the lion's den; Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego from the fiery furnace.

Wendy Farley argues in her book, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion*, that trouble is an intrinsic part of life. The world is inherently dangerous. Bad things just happen. That's the kind of world we live in. "Some wandered in desert wastes... some sat in darkness... some were sick... some went down to the sea...." All found trouble; some who had only themselves to blame and some who were just being part of the business of life. For Farley, the important question for the believer isn't where did all this trouble come from; but how does God respond to it. Her answer: "with compassion." This psalm agrees by suggesting that God is always ready to hear and respond to "cries of distress.

You may or may not agree with that, but this is the psalmist's viewpoint. To those who cry out from the desert, God leads by a straight path until they reach an inhabited place. To those who cry out from prison, God "shatters the doors of bronze and cuts in two the bars of iron." To those who cry out from the trials of illness, God sends out a word and heals them. To those who cry out from the midst of the storm, God stills the storm and hushes the waves.

This all seems a bit naïve in a world that remembers the holocaust, that is witness to the persistence of systemic racism, not to mention countless personal stories where help failed to arrive in the time of trouble. The truth about God's readiness to hear the cries of those in trouble is not immediately obvious; but the psalmist insists.

God responds to the hungry, listens to those who "are brought low through oppression, trouble and sorrow... and raises up the needy." This is the God that Jesus spoke of and believed in, despite the evidence to the contrary. He was himself numbered among the oppressed of Rome, experienced a cross for his troubles. He would have embraced the psalmist's closing words: "Let those who are wise give heed to these things, and consider the steadfast love of the Lord."

This is why he encouraged his disciples to pray, to ask God for their daily bread, for God's will to be done on earth. This is why he proclaimed "good news to the poor, release to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed; why he commanded the disciples to feed the hungry crowds; why he cured the lame and the leper; why he ate with sinners. He believes that God hears the cries of those in trouble, that God is filled with compassion, that the "steadfast love of God endures forever.... Let the redeemed of the Lord says so..." Amen.