



“God’s Stubborn Love”
Scripture – Psalm 107:1-9, 23-32, 43
Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, February 28, 2016

“They cried to the Lord in their trouble, and God delivered them from their distress.” If it were only that simple.

The 107th Psalm is a carefully crafted song with a refrain that repeats after each of its four vignettes. The first setting is a group of people lost in the desert who have run out of food and are dying of thirst.

The second episode tells of the Hebrew people being held as slaves in Egypt. Their spirits were nearly broken by the hard labor they were forced to perform.

The third scene is a village where a deadly disease has spread. The people are too ill to eat and are near death.

The fourth account tells of sailors caught in a ferocious storm with high winds thrashing them and waves crashing over their vessel. The storm is so violent that it has sapped every ounce of their courage.

After each of these four stories, we hear the same lines: “Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble and God brought them out of their distress...Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love.”

In my youth, I might have affirmed the theology of this psalm without hesitation. But as I became aware of young mothers dying of cancer, children killed in accidents, and people’s lives ruined by mental illness, I realized its simple formula did not always pan out.

Richard Lischer is a professor at Duke Divinity School. A couple of years ago he wrote a book about the death of his son. He writes: “Seven years ago, on the thirteenth day of April, my son called to tell me his cancer had returned. He was a grown man, but he told me his news like a boy. He said, ‘Hey, Dad, where’s Mom?’ You would have thought he had just put a dent in the family’s new car or failed a final exam. He might have been in a little trouble and wanted his mother to buffer the rough edges. He said they had found tumors in quite a few places...Then he asked me to come to him. And that was all. I was not expecting the call. But then you never are. You are never adequately braced with feet planted and stomach muscles clenched. A phone call from your son. A familiar voice emerges from a piece of inexpensive black plastic. The voice has no body, and yet it makes a claim as firm and authoritative as flesh. It says, ‘Hey, Dad’ with an end stress on Dad that has always and in every circumstance meant trouble. ‘Hey, Dad,’ and ordinary time stands still and the room begins to turn while you wait for the rest of the sentence to do its work.”

“‘Why don’t you come over,’ it says. The ruin in his voice becomes the new truth in your life, and your old life, the only one you’ve ever known or wanted, simply vanishes.”¹

Similar words could have been written by several within our church family. A nasty disease or an accident snatched their child from them and no amount of praying could stop it. They cried to God in their trouble, but God did *not* bring them out of their distress. Is God’s steadfast love merely pious rhetoric?

For those who suffer a tragedy, a passage such as the 107th Psalm is distressing. It makes them feel angry or guilty. Angry that they pleaded to God and God did not save them. Guilty because they feel that if they had just done something differently, they could have prevented the disaster. What are we to do with Psalm 107?

It is vital to keep in mind that this psalm is not the only voice in Scripture on unjust suffering. Remember Job? Its opening lines make it clear that Job was a model of virtue and in harmony with God; yet, one disaster after another strikes him. The book is intended to counter any simple formula that says if you do what is right, nothing bad will happen to you. Or, if disaster strikes, simply cry out to God and in swoops the rescue squad.

The fact that innocent people suffer is a hard-life lesson. People in every generation whose lives are untouched by tragedy often imagine that God is rewarding them for their virtuous lives. But only if they are lucky, do they make it through life unscathed. The Gospel of Luke includes an incident in which 18 people were killed when a tower collapsed. Jesus tells his followers that these people were not killed because they were worse sinners than anyone else. He offers no explanation for the tragedy. It just happened.

If we profess faith in God because we think it will safeguard us from suffering, we stand a strong chance of losing our faith.

Three days ago, a man in Kansas went on a shooting spree killing three and wounding 14. Mass shootings have become so commonplace in our country that they blur together. When I hear someone say “God is in control” or “Everything happens according to God’s plan,” I cringe. God does not want people to die from acts of violence, accidents, wars or preventable diseases.

Why do we believe that God can do anything? For one, we so badly *want* it to be true. The world seems too frightening without such a belief. We have a subconscious desire that God will protect us from severe, unjust suffering.

In addition to satisfying this deep emotional need, this is what the church taught us. I suspect many of us were taught that if something awful strikes, pray and God will rescue you. This idea is reinforced if we are taught that prayer is asking God to give us what we want. This notion of prayer imagines God to be like the genie in the bottle who will grant our wishes.

Then, there is the problem with the adjectives we use for God. When we pray, we often say *Gracious* God or *Loving* God or *Eternal* God, all of which are on target. Two threads running throughout the Bible are that God is loving and God is forever.

However, there is another adjective routinely used that is not as Biblical as we have been led to believe. How many times have we heard, “*Almighty* God?” Look up the word *almighty* in a dictionary and the definition will include having unlimited power; omnipotent.

Is this not also a thread running throughout Scripture? That God is almighty?

Please pull out the pew Bible and open it to the 17th chapter of Genesis. It is on page 12. Verse one reads, “When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, ‘I am God Almighty.’”

There it is in Scripture. Case closed, right? Before you shut your Bible, can you see that miniscule letter that appears after the word Almighty? The font is so tiny it is maddening – it looks like Times New Roman, font size 2. Someone with perfect vision, or a magnifying glass, shout out what that letter is. (It is a “t”.)

That is a footnote on the word Almighty, and if you go to the bottom of the page where the footnotes are in font size 1, here is what you will read: “Traditional rendering of the Hebrew *El Shaddai*.”

Bear with me. This is an important language lesson. In Hebrew, the original language of the Old Testament, the word is *El Shaddai*. This was a proper name for God. A more familiar name for God in the Old Testament is “Yahweh” which our English Bibles translate “Lord.”

When the Bible was first translated from Hebrew into Greek, the translators made a decision. They thought that if they translated *El Shaddai* as a proper name for God, it would imply that the Israelites had two gods – Yahweh and *El Shaddai*. So, they decided to translate *El Shaddai* as “Almighty.” They did it for a theological reason, not a linguistic reason. They decided to assert God’s power, even though the Hebrew word has nothing to do with power. *El Shaddai* means “the God of the mountain.” It is most likely a reference to the belief that God lived on Mount Sinai.

But, in order to avoid the implication that Israel had two gods, the translators made a fateful decision with lasting repercussions. So, now, running throughout the Old Testament – six times in Genesis, more than 25 times in Job, but also in Exodus, Numbers, Ruth, two of the psalms and three of the prophets, you will find Almighty God, and after each one of them is that tiny footnote saying that the Hebrew word really means: the God of the mountain.

Jesus never used the word Almighty. He embodied a different understanding of God. According to Jesus, God is not the omnipotent ruler who could take away suffering if he felt like it, but rather the God who suffers with us – the “Crucified God.”² God is the One who loves us with a depth unknown to humans, and God’s love for us is so stubborn, that nothing – not even death – can separate us from God.

That cracks open the door to life beyond this world. The harshness of the death of a child is magnified many times if the material world is all there is. If what we can perceive with our senses is the whole ball game, then we truly live in a cruel and ultimately meaningless world. But if there is a reality beyond this physical world, then life can be hopeful.

Yale professor Christian Wiman wrote a book after he was diagnosed with cancer in his thirties. Staring death in the face, he concluded that there are three ways to deal with the fear of death. “You can simply refuse to acknowledge it, dulling your concerns with alcohol or entertainment or exercise or even a sort of virtuous busyness... (Second,) you can give yourself over to a kind of furious resistance that may very well carry you through your travails and may seem to the world triumphant, perhaps even heroic. But if it is merely your will you are asserting, then you will develop a shell around your soul...and one day you will turn to dust inside that shell...(There is another way). It is the way of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane (trusting God’s love for us never ends)... Vaclav Havel said, Hope is not a response to the circumstances in which you find yourself. It is a condition of your soul.”³

Some people say, “What we can see, hear, smell, touch, and taste is all there is,” but others cannot shake the belief that reality includes more than we can grasp. And contemporary physicists confirm it. They have discovered that the universe is much more complex than we are able to perceive.

I had a wonderful conversation with Jim Bennett six days ago. Jim was a beloved pastor of Westminster for nearly 30 years. Before the call, his daughter had been told that Jim still had weeks – maybe even months – to live. None of us knew that Monday would be his last lucid day before drifting into a semiconscious condition. We did not talk long, but Jim told me that that he was ready to die. Actually, more than ready. He has been ready since his wife, Audrey died last October. He has missed her terribly.

What struck me about our conversation was the immense joy in Jim's voice. He had gotten a whiff of eternity and he was eagerly anticipating a new adventure, reunited with his soul mate.

What to do with Psalm 107? I have changed my perspective on it. This psalm may be like a painting that anyone can look at and see an obvious scene. But if you have eyes to see beyond the obvious, it reveals another layer - something more profound. I think this psalm takes the long view. It does not say that God's steadfast love endures during our lifetimes. It says *forever*. That is where the emphasis is to be placed. God's love for us endures not only in this world, but also in the world to come.

NOTES

1. Richard Lischer, *Stations of the Heart: Parting with a Son*, (New York: Knopf, 2013), p.88.
2. The haunting phrase coined by theologian Jurgen Moltmann.
3. Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013), p. 166.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

Holy God, we have heard of your mighty deeds ... How you delivered our ancestors from their distress, leading them out of desert wastelands and calming storms that raged upon the sea. From generation to generation, you have been faithful to us. So we join our voices with the Psalmist and give thanks for your wonderful works, your steadfast love.

If we are honest, some days these prayers do not come easily. Some days we choke on words of gratitude because your wonderful works seem few and far between. Some days we can only echo our ancestors' cries of distress, as we wander in our desert wastelands or wonder if the next storm will swallow us whole. On these days we take comfort that you – who suffer with us – hear our prayers, whether they are born of gratitude and joy, or rise from the depths of despair.

We pray for all who wander in parched places, thirsty for your guidance and support. We lift up those who grieve the loss of loved ones, or relationships, or security, or health. Sustain them, we pray, that they may experience your comfort and rest in your loving embrace.

As storms of violence rage around us, O God, we pray for justice and for peace. Be with those who flee war-torn lands, and with those in our own land who have no place of refuge. Be with our nation as we reel from yet another mass shooting, and help us channel our pain into action, until we build a society where all your children flourish.

And – when our own souls faint within us – we pray for ourselves, O God. On these days, enfold us in your arms and strengthen our faith, until we can lift our voices with the hope of the Psalmist and proclaim: Your steadfast love endures forever!

We lift these prayers in the name of Jesus Christ – the one who wandered in desert wastelands, and who calmed the storm at sea. The one who has won victory over death, and who will come again to make all things new. The

one who lifted his voice from the depths of despair, and who gave us words to pray when our own words fail us. We lift them to you now:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day, our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.