

The Steadfast Love of God
Second Sunday after Pentecost
Psalm 138 and 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:2
June 6, 2021
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When the pandemic hit in March of 2020, I initially thought we would be out of the sanctuary for a couple of weeks, at most for the season of Lent. Accustomed to regarding one missed “snow Sunday” as a major upheaval, I consoled myself with images of re-entering the sanctuary, triumphantly, by Easter. How naïve, uninformed, and even foolish those original thoughts appear now.

In the five weeks since we have re-entered the sanctuary as a community, a certain tenderness has accompanied our worship. It is wonderfully familiar to be together and yet also strange, as if we are figuring out old practices anew. Joy accompanies worship, but it is not unmitigated joy, not with all the suffering of the past fifteen months. At the pandemic’s beginning, some colleagues used the language of exile to speak about this separation between sacred space and worshiping community. I resisted the word, instead wanting to cling to the truth that worship happens anywhere we are present to the Spirit’s presence. Now I wonder if they were onto something too painful for me to name. We have lived through an exilic season, whether one has experienced that exile as being separated from familiar routines, favorite people, or this sacred space.

For ancient Israel, the exile was a historical event; the deportation of leading citizens from Jerusalem into Babylon after a military defeat. That community watched their sanctuary, the temple at Jerusalem, be destroyed. The once towering symbol of God’s sovereign presence and blessing upon them was decimated into a pile of crushed stones. For roughly two generations the deportees lived as refugees in a foreign land. Psalm 137, the psalm preceding today’s reading, expresses their exilic grief. “By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept. Our captors asked us for songs, but how could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” When a new king permitted their return to Jerusalem, it was not a triumphant homecoming but more a muted affair, a slow trickle of persons making their way homeward. Some exiles were ready to return and face the difficult task of rebuilding. Others made the equally difficult choice to remain their adopted land.

Exile had been a harsh teacher. The people of God were forced to face the mistakes - the sins, really - that had contributed to their misfortune. They had to contend with traumatic memories, learn a new language, and figure out how to worship without their central sanctuary. Yet they didn’t stop worshipping. They didn’t cease from reading scripture, reciting prayers, and finding new ways to keep the sacred rhythms of their faith. Somehow, I believe, even in the 6th century BCE, the worship practices of the scattered faithful remained connected. Psalms were written, put into knapsacks, and delivered from one community to another. These psalms enabled them to share hope, music, and assurances about God, who, they were learning, remained faithful to them in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, at home and in

exile. Psalm 138 gives voice to this truth. "I give you thanks, O Lord, for your steadfast love and faithfulness. Your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever."

The steadfast love of God. In Hebrew, the word is *hesed*. Scattered throughout scripture are references to God's *hesed*, translated loving-kindness, mercy, or loyalty. There is not a direct English translation for this steadfast love. The word is particular to Hebrew scriptures. Furthermore, *hesed* is a noun, not an adjective. This is not an occasional qualifier of God but an essential quality of God. God names God's self this way when offering to Moses the second stone set of the Ten Commandments, prepared for people whose disobedience had caused the destruction of the first set. God declares, I am "the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love." (Exodus 34: 6) This loving kindness is not a general feeling, but an action activated within a relationship. The word is reserved for those particular moments when someone is in distress, such deep distress that they cannot save themselves, and must look to another, more powerful one, to come to their aid. The steadfast love of the Lord to us, a people in need, never ceases, writes the psalmist. This is the defining characteristic of God.

In today's psalm, the exile has ended. The community recounts what they have endured and what God has done. "When we called, you answered. Even though you are high above us, you do not forget the lowly. When we walked through trouble, you preserved us from our enemies. And by your right hand, we have been saved."

Amid all their praise for God's deliverance persists a worry. The psalm ends with a plea. "Do not forsake the work of your hands." Do not forsake us. Alongside the trust is doubt. Alongside the gratitude is anxiety. Alongside their confidence in God's love is a concern that the love might be withdrawn. Faith is a stepping into this gap between trust and doubt, confidence and worry, past action and future hope. The exile is over, but the hardship is not. The need for God's mercy is unending.

It was two months after the onset of the pandemic when George Floyd was murdered. His death was placed on top of too many others. The protests on the streets named again that it is possible to live in the United States and be exiled from justice, cut off from being treated with dignity. We are still on the road toward a better home, a more merciful community. And we must see the large swaths of suffering still existing. We have been through something difficult together and we have not all had the same experience. Do not forsake the work of your hands, O God. Do not leave us now, as the demands of the moment still call out for our faithful responses and for your redemption.

The psalms are the prayerbook of God's people, 150 different prayers to God for every imaginable occasion. And so it seems appropriate at this moment to imagine our own psalm. Here is a prayer to add to the chorus of witnesses.

We praise you, O God, for your steadfast love,
Its steadiness has anchored us amid the year's choppy seas,

Its firmness has held us secure,
from our rising to face the day until we have laid down, exhausted.

The arms of your love have wrapped around us, encircling us during
months of sickness upon sickness, death upon death, loss upon loss.

We cried out to you in anguish –
One hundred thousand, two hundred thousand, five hundred thousand,
Ahmaud, Breanna, George,
Mass shouting after mass shooting,
and you heard our distress.

You provided for us places of nourishment,
worship across the wires, gatherings via Zoom,
face-mask makers aplenty, deliverers of food,
outdoor communion, evenings to look up and watch for the stars.

We did not know we could walk through fifteen months of distance,
Exiled from family reunions, shared vacations, workroom banter,
and most of all, your holy sanctuary.

But your strength carried us. You said, “Do not lose heart.”
So we sing to you our grateful praise.

We lament the lives that have left this earth, too many lives, O God.

We entrust them to you, who have proclaimed, I am the resurrection and the life.

We lament the suffering of children isolated from friends, school corridors and recess,
and that of the aged, quarantined from handshakes,
home visits, activities to stimulate the brain.

We confess our own complicity, our resignation to living in a world stratified by income,
allowing life or death to be, too often, determined by neighborhood or skin color.

Do not forsake us now, as we are slowly learning our lives
are not measured by productivity
nor overflowing schedules, but by moments of kindness, small gestures of love.

As the doors open and the masks come down,
stretch out your hand to the anxious.

Walk beside us in our discomfort.

Rescue those still vulnerable to the ravages of COVID, racism, poverty or isolation.

For your steadfast love is stronger than life. Your mercy is life. Make it our lives as well. Amen.