

Never Runs Out

Psalm 107

March 14, 2021

First Presbyterian, Luling

We haven't talked much about Lent this year, and depending on what you think about Lent and about talking about Lent, that's either chalked up to my credit or a demerit on my report card. Lent began in the middle of that big snowstorm, when we were all distracted by the basics of human survival. And I've heard people say that it feels like we're still in Lent from a year ago, with the things we've had to give up in the name of safety and loving our neighbor. Today is the fourth Sunday of Lent, and I'm finally getting around to mentioning it a little bit.

Lent is a time of repentance and reflecting on both our human limitations and our capacity for sin, our tendency toward foolishness, and the various ways we get ourselves into trouble. All of that together is a way of preparing ourselves for Easter morning, when God's forgiveness in Jesus Christ is made known to us and made real to us again in the celebration of the empty tomb and Resurrection Day.

I don't know about you, but when I begin to reflect on my foolishness and sin and limitations, it can get to be a long list. And I can get to feeling like surely I am the only person in the universe who is this messed up, who has said this many insensitive things, who has disregarded and disrespected this many people, who has slacked off this many days in a row, who has made this many wrong decisions, the only one who gets grumpy and tired the week after Daylight Savings time, and on and on. I can keep going for quite a while. And then of course, I realize something. And that something is that I'm trying to make myself special in how bad I'm judging myself to be, which is yet another thing I'll need to confess and repent of. Maybe we're beginning to realize why I was avoiding Lent this year, huh? I don't think I'm the only one who can get wrapped up in myself and my own shortcomings like this.

We read that whole Psalm this morning, even though it was pretty long, because it's just one of the places that Scripture reminds us that we're not as uniquely terrible or especially awful as we think we are. And it gently reminds us that an exclusive focus on ourselves is not where we're supposed to stop. There's more to Lent than that.

The Psalm starts off with a general statement of praise, for God's love that never runs out. And then invites everyone God has freed to tell their stories. Then there are four sections that follow an identical pattern. Each one starts off "some of you" and then lists some kind of trouble humans can get into. Some of you wandered in the desert, some of you were locked in a dark cell, some of you were sick because you'd lived a bad life, some of you set sail in big ships far away. It doesn't take too much imagination to translate those troubles to our own lives. Then follows, in each case, a description of each of those kinds of bad situations humans get into. I think the repetition and varied situations that the Psalmist includes invite us to insert our own situations into the pattern. It's an invitation for us to think of a sticky situation that we're in, likely at least partially of our own making, and to describe that situation to ourselves, and to God, being honest about what has happened and our part in it.

Next in the pattern is this, exactly the same words each time: "Then you called out to God in your desperate condition; he got you out in the nick of time." You're in a bad spot. You pleaded with God to help you. God got you out of that bad spot.

Then next is a description of exactly how God got you out of the mess. God put you on the right path. God led you out of the jail. God healed you God quieted the wind and waves. God fixed it, somehow.

Then there's an instruction, again identical in each of these four sections. "So thank God for his marvelous love, for his miracle mercy to the children he loves." For those of you who have a more formal version in your head, the NRSV says "Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wonderful works to humankind." God's marvelous, steadfast love that never runs out. That's what we're thanking God for, after God delivers us from our own human frail-ness and failings.

After those four situations are resolved in exactly the same way, the psalmist lists some other ways that God saves humans from their own poor decisions and circumstances that are beyond their control. Then the psalm concludes with another call to praise: "it's time you appreciated God's deep love."

This psalm offers us a pattern not only for Lent. Admit the situation you've gotten yourself in, whether it's a result of your own foolishness or some other human limitation on your part or someone else's. Ask for God's help getting out of trouble. Recognize God's help when it arrives. And then thank God for God's steadfast love and miracle mercy.

If you think about it, this is not just a Lent pattern, but a pattern we follow each week of the year. Each Sunday, we share a prayer of confession that acknowledges the situations we get ourselves into, asks God's help and forgiveness, we receive God's deliverance in the words of pardon. And then we sing praise to God in the Gloria Patri.

Humans, ourselves included, are not going to stop getting ourselves into messes. Our ancestors in the faith did it, and so has everyone else, and so do we. And those ancestors offer us a pattern: ask for God's help, notice God's help, thank God for the rescue and endless patience with us. God's steadfast love, God's marvelous and deep love that never runs out. That's what sustains us through Lent and every week of the year.