

## Always and Everywhere Give Thanks

(Psalm 107:1-9, 43)

Sermon delivered by The Very Rev. Matt Rhodes at Christ Church, Millwood, Virginia  
Eighth Sunday after Pentecost, August 4, 2019

In the name of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

*Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good  
and his mercy endures forever.*

Psalm 107 is a psalm of **thanksgiving**. In these verses we hear of a time of wandering ... a time of exile ... a time of anxiety and need. In this excerpt we have what amounts to a little case study of God at work in the world, a time when a problem was solved ... a point when a question was asked and God answered ... when a cry was lifted and God responded.

It is a **joyful** psalm. It is a psalm **filled** with **gratitude**. It is a psalm **filled** with **singing** ... a chorus of happiness and relief and recognition of all that God has accomplished. It is the song sung by a people once separated from their home who have been **saved**.

I had already hit a mental roadblock when I saw Psalm 107 included in the lectionary for this week and was not sure how I would preach on it. It is no secret that we are not living in the best of times. There is much around us causing pain, and grief, and disappointment. Even as I was gathering my thoughts yesterday for this sermon, the news broke of even more horrific violence, this time at a shopping mall in El Paso, Texas.

Every time I think that my heart cannot break any more than it already has ... every time I think that my sorrow over the ever-increasing incidents of humanity's ongoing inhumanity has reached its peak ... something new happens. The politics of gun violence is ongoing, with no end or solution in sight. The fix is not imminent; sadly, the results of each incident are immediate. And while the faces of those who will one day solve this problem are unclear to us, the face of every victim of every violent act is very clear.

So with all of this swirling around in my head, I tried to reconcile our world today with the words of the psalmist.

And as I reflected I found that it is **within the psalm itself** that we have the direction for a response to what is going on around us.

*Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good  
and his mercy endures forever.*

Now stay with me for a moment and let me explain what I mean by that.

We listen to the divisive political rhetoric being cast from side to side and watch helplessly as it overwhelms our news cycles, fills up our social media feeds, and weighs down our minds and hearts with emotions ranging from sorrow to anger. What do we do?

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We witness the floods and droughts, the fires and storms, and all the changes taking place to “this fragile earth, our island home.”<sup>1</sup> In the aftermath, we see the impacts of these events on our nations, our environment and our people. What can we do?

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We see the hunger and violence, the poverty and homelessness, the abuses and addictions that impact our brothers and sisters – those both known and unknown to us – and that take their toll on communities and societies around the world. What should we do?

*Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good  
and his mercy endures forever.*

Now I know that for some of you, every bit of what I have just said sounds counter-intuitive. **Give thanks** to God as a response to **division**? **Give thanks** to God as a response to **degradation**? **Give thanks** to God as a response to **violence and harm**? In a word, yes – but I do not think it is necessarily giving thanks to God and as much as offering thanks for God. I think it is necessary to offer thanks rooted in what we know in Hebrew as *chesed* ... a word meaning *faithfulness* and *loyalty*.

As I have said from this pulpit in the past it is easy to be thankful when things are good ... when everything is coming up roses. It is however much harder, perhaps seemingly impossible, to be thankful when the blooms are missing and all we see are the thorns. In our own ways, we wander in our own deserts ... separated from something or someone ... suffering from our own hunger or thirst ... seeking our own relief from distress and for a city in which to dwell.

We lift our own cries to God and wonder how so much of what we see can take place ... the age-old theological question of why a loving God could allow these things to happen. People in society are disappointed and disappoint one another I think because they often get so bogged down in showing mercy to one another ... or even in withholding mercy from one another ... that they become blind to the mercy of God. They get so overwhelmed by what is going on in the here and now that they forget to look behind them into the past to see the faithfulness of God at work. And perhaps, just perhaps, they are afraid to look forward because of a fear that the faithfulness and mercy of God will not in fact endure forever.

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<sup>1</sup> From Eucharistic Prayer C in *The Book of Common Prayer*, p. 370.

I would say simply to remember this: at ***all times***, and in ***all places***, and despite ***any circumstance***, God ***is*** faithful and loyal. God made a covenant with us, and no matter what we do to ourselves or to one another, God ***honors that covenant***. ***God is steadfast***, and ***his mercy endures forever***. We can disappoint God. We can sadden God. We can break God's heart – and we do, time and time and time again. But God will ***never*** abandon us, just as he never abandoned those in exile and wandering in the desert centuries ago.

And nothing ... ***nothing*** ... that we can do will ***ever*** change that.

I would like to end this morning by returning to the words of the psalm we just heard. But this time, I would like to share it in a more direct translation from the Hebrew. Listen for the similarities to what is printed in your bulletin insert, and pay attention to the differences. Listen for the beauty. Listen for the whisper of God. And give thanks to the Lord, for ***he is good*** and his mercy endures ***forever***.

*Acclaim the Lord, for He is good,  
for His kindness is forever.  
Let the Lord's redeemed ones say,  
whom he redeemed from the hand of the foe,  
And gathered them from the lands,  
from east and west, from north and south.  
They wandered in wilderness, wasteland,  
found no road to a settled town,  
Hungry, thirsty, too,  
their life-breath failed within them.  
And they cried to the Lord from their straits,  
from their distress He saved them.  
And He led them on a straight road  
to go to a settled town.  
Let them acclaim to the Lord His kindness  
and His wonders to humankind.  
For He sated the thirsting throat  
and the hungry throat he filled with good –  
He who is wise will watch these  
and take to heart the Lord's kindnesses.<sup>2</sup>*

Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Alter. *The Hebrew Bible – A Translation with Commentary*, Vol. 3, pp. 256 and 259.