

Whoever Welcomes
Rev. Nicole Farley
First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
June 29, 2014

Psalm 89:1-4, 15-18

- ¹ I will sing of your steadfast love, O Lord, for ever;
with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations.
- ² I declare that your steadfast love is established for ever;
your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens.
- ³ You said, ‘I have made a covenant with my chosen one,
I have sworn to my servant David:
- ⁴ “I will establish your descendants for ever,
and build your throne for all generations.” ’
- ¹⁵ Happy are the people who know the festal shout,
who walk, O Lord, in the light of your countenance;
- ¹⁶ they exult in your name all day long,
and extol your righteousness.
- ¹⁷ For you are the glory of their strength;
by your favor our horn is exalted.
- ¹⁸ For our shield belongs to the Lord,
our king to the Holy One of Israel.

Matthew 10:40-42

- ⁴⁰ ‘Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.
- ⁴¹ Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet’s reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous;
- ⁴² and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.’

Our psalm tells us “Blessed are those who exclaim how great God is, those who recognize how great God is, those who put their trust in God.” “For our shield belongs to the Lord.” We need this trust, this shield, we need to believe in this shield who is God to have the courage to go out in the name of the Lord. We know that, especially for the earliest Christians, to spread the good news can be a dangerous task. Especially these ones, to whom Jesus refers as the “little ones.” These little ones were the outliers, the backwater folk, the marginalized, in particular, not those who were big and powerful.

In earliest days, these were the ones who knew that to become a martyr, in our terms, which is to say killed for the sake of the gospel, was highly possible. In their terms they were already martyrs for martyr, *marturos* in Greek, means witness. Whoever welcomes witnesses to Jesus welcomes Jesus, and whoever welcomes Jesus welcomes the one who sent Jesus. They went out not only as witnesses to the teachings of Christ but specifically the teachings of Christ grounded in their shared faith of Judaism, Judaism which holds at its core to this day the Tanakh. The name Tanakh comes from the three sections of the Hebrew Bible, the Torah, Ta, the Nevi’im, Na, and the Ketuvim, Kh. The teachings, the prophets,

and the writings. These three sections were integral to temple teaching and on the foundation of these teachings, Jesus expanded on their meaning through the lens of God's love. These witnesses went out knowing the Ketuvim, the writings, which include the psalms, which include today's psalm.

Our selection from today's psalm is only partial for there are thirty-four more verses to the psalm. What we read, if you remember back to our learning about Jeremiah last week, is not quite a lament in the purest religious form like our reading from Jeremiah was. What we have heard are ascriptions of praise to God; what follows our reading, for thirty-three of the thirty-four subsequent verses, are complaints about God to God, listing the ways in which the author had expected God to behave and the ways of God which did not match up. This psalm was surely known by the early witnesses. They were promised a messiah but, when the messiah came, he did not save them in the way they thought he would and then he was killed. They were given the good news of God's love and salvation and yet they and their peers were persecuted for God's sake.

Our reading from Matthew is somewhat of a pep talk to those witnesses for whom Matthew wrote. He writes of those who welcome prophets and righteous people and of those who show hospitality to the disciples and speaks of the rewards, although vaguely, which they will receive for their behavior. If they are to be rewarded, surely those disciples, those "little ones" who are reviled and persecuted for Jesus' sake will be rewarded even more. If I had been among them, knowing those very human parts of me, I suspect I would have wished for God to reward me in the "now" and, if it didn't happen that way, would have wondered where God had gone, why God was not showing me clear support in response to my support of God.

In my better moments, when I sing of God's steadfast love and faithfulness, when I extol God's righteousness, I am able to affirm what Professor James Henry Harris describes. He says, "An economic crisis, no more than a serious illness or a natural disaster, does not cancel out the sovereignty of God."¹ He expands through the words of the black church, saying "It is an 'in spite of' theology that understands God as a God who, in the language of the black church tradition, 'may not come when you want Him, but is always on time.'"²

Jesus spoke of how rewarded the welcoming ones would be exactly because that welcome could not be expected. Those who stretch and go beyond themselves and the cultural norms and the Roman laws would find reward in him. Facing much opposition and persecution both witnesses and welcomers endured much for the sake of the gospel. And yet, as we know from accounts of martyrs, they did so

¹ *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 3*, p. 179.

² *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 3*, p. 181.

gladly, even cheerfully. Professor Harris explains this plainly, “we can celebrate and shout, not because of what we have endured, but because of who God is.”³

And this is why a psalm of complaint against God can begin with “I will sing of your steadfast love, O God, for ever; with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations. I declare that your steadfast love is established for ever; your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens.” Even though that which we come up against when we share the gospel is not like what the earliest believers faced, courage is often required still. We carry in our faith foundation these writings shared by our sisters and brothers in the Hebrew faith and so their God who is their shield is our shield as well. God is the glory of our strength, by God’s favor we are exalted, our shield belongs to the Lord. With confidence let us both welcome and seek to be welcomed.

Let us pray: Steadfast and faithful God, open our mouths that we might sing your praises wherever we go. Amen.

2 MINUTES FOR QUIET REFLECTION

³ Ibid.