

First Reading: Psalm 107: 1-9

- 1 "Give thanks to the Lord because God is good,
because God's faithful love lasts forever!"
- 2 That's what those who are redeemed by the Lord say,
the ones God redeemed from the power of their enemies,
- 3 the ones God gathered from various countries,
from east and west, north and south.
- 4 Some of the redeemed had wandered into the desert, into the wasteland.
They couldn't find their way to a city or town.
- 5 They were hungry and thirsty;
their lives were slipping away.
- 6 So they cried out to the Lord in their distress,
and God delivered them from their desperate circumstances.
- 7 God led them straight to human habitation.
- 8 Let them thank the Lord for God's faithful love
and God's wondrous works for all people,
- 9 because God satisfied the one who was parched with thirst,
and God filled up the hungry with good things!

Second Reading: Psalm 107: 33-43

- 33 God turns rivers into desert,
watery springs into thirsty ground,
- 34 fruitful land into unproductive dirt,
when its inhabitants are wicked.
- 35 But God can also turn the desert into watery pools,
thirsty ground into watery springs,
- 36 where God settles the hungry.
They even build a city and live there!
- 37 They plant fields and vineyards
and obtain a fruitful harvest.
- 38 God blesses them, and they become many.
God won't even let their cattle diminish.
- 39 But when they do diminish—
when they're brought down by oppression, trouble, and grief—
- 40 God pours contempt on their leaders,
making them wander aimlessly in the wastelands.
- 41 But God raises the needy from their suffering;
God makes their families as numerous as sheep!
- 42 Those who do right see it and celebrate,
but every wicked person shuts their mouth.
- 43 Whoever is wise will pay attention to these things,
carefully considering the Lord's faithful love

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“Our Troubles are God's Troubles”

This year has brought with it so many losses. Some are very apparent. Within First Congregational Church we mourn the loss of two members whose presence is sorely missed. Lena Ward died on June 18th. I will miss the ritual hug from Lena after Sunday worship. When a sermon spoke to her she would let me know with gratitude and a hug. When a sermon was of lesser clarity and maybe not that good, she would let me know with gratitude and a hug. That sort of steadfastness is a quality often ascribed to God in the Hebrew Bible. We should all strive to such love. As Lena's health was failing, you could see that same love acted out by her husband Tom. We call upon the memory of Lena as part of the great cloud of witness.

We also lost Jim Walton, who died on August 2nd. Jim was a character in the best sense. My relationship with Jim is a testament to mutual respect and the importance of being involved in our community. Some of you have heard me say this before, but a few months before Jim died, after choir practice, Jim came to my office for a conversation.

He was sharing his disagreement about something and wanted to hear my opinion. As we parted he said that he may not always agree with what I do as a minister, but that his disagreement should never stop me from doing what I feel called to do. He said that it was obvious I cared deeply for our community and that was good enough for him. We call upon the memory of Jim as part of the great cloud of witness.

Many of us have released friends, family, and loved ones into that same cloud of witness. If you have lost someone this year, please join with me: we will say together: We call upon the memory of (your person) as part of the great cloud of witness.

We call upon the memory of (your person) as part of the great cloud of witness

We also know that we have lost much more than just people this last year. Even as we are doing our best to stay connected, stay safe, and protect our neighbors, there is a

sense of loss that is impossible to miss. Much like the psalmist was doing, we will look back, and future generations will look back, to this time, to help understand that future day.

We will see that even though we might feel lost right now, or that tomorrow will be perilous, and maybe more so because of the loss of our people, we will be able to look back and know that we were sustained by the spirit of those who have gone before us and the steadfast love and presence of God that resides in this moment.

Part of remembering our own Saints is to remember what they experienced, how they persevered, and where they found the presence of God in their lives. Calling upon these pioneers and witnesses in our own lives of faith gives us a longer memory that will exceed our own individual memory. By remembering, we are building more resilience even into future generations.

This ritual of speaking names and remembering is much like what the Psalmist is doing in Psalm 107. Psalm 107 is a psalm of thanksgiving, but that is not a simple thing. Verses 1-32 might have been a liturgical script used during a pilgrimage in four repetitive narratives. We read only the first one in the first reading.

Each one of the four sections follows the same four-part pattern. Each section is also described as one of the four cardinal directions. First there is a description of what happened. In the one we read it was about people wondering in the wilderness, far from the security and resources of an inhabited town. This description matches the real experience of the land to the east of Jerusalem all the way to the east side of the fertile crescent. It was a desolate passage.

The second part of each section is the account the prayer, or the crying out of the person or people. The third part is the account of the delivery from the trouble. God responded to the trouble almost before the prayer is spoken, as if to describe God as actively attentive.

And then there is verse 8. These words of thanksgiving are repeated word-for-word in all four sections. It is a ritual practice of thanksgiving, that regardless of the situation or what happened, two things remain the same. The steadfast love

of God and the thankfulness of the people.

The psalmist is using thanksgiving and steadfast love as a way of narration of what has happened. There is first the speaking of what went wrong, what the people may have done to get themselves into a mess. But even more than that, this witness, or narrative of what happened, would have been accompanied by an act. There would be an utterance and a gesture, or in a Christian framework, word is followed by sacrament, preaching as witness and communion, or perhaps speaking a name and lighting a candle.

But before this all sounds too formulaic, as if with every problem, if sufficient prayer is given, an immediate delivery from that trouble will follow and thanksgiving will resound full of peaceful resolution, it is not that transactional.

For the psalmist, God is always the primary actor. The people are of course active, but not the source or initiators of steadfast love. The people are responding to that. The steadfast love of God is present even before it is needed or asked for, and therefore thankfulness should be a constant response, even if thanksgiving is difficult to find in the precise moment.

This reliance on the faithfulness of God is difficult for our culture. We are taught that we should strive first to be self-sufficient all by ourselves, and if we falter then we should pick ourselves up by ourselves. We are taught that wisdom is getting ahead by any means as long as we don't get caught and that we can gain security by planning, investing, and good management.

Even our notions of prayer and deliverance often follow this individualistic and transactional model. It is so difficult for most of us not to see prayer and deliverance as a transactional relationship. If we pray or plead correctly then God will deliver and that if we are not delivered then we didn't pray, plead, or show sufficient guilt.

It will never be that simple, and the psalmist knows that. God is both fully responsive and fully free. We are a part of both, but we are not the source of either. We practice thanksgiving without, or even before, knowing what may happen.

Biblical scholar, Walter Brueggemann, talks about the responsiveness of God in verses 4-32 and the freedom of God in 33-43. He says that: "Neither responsiveness without freedom or freedom without responsiveness would lead to gladness. But Israel, in its thanksgiving and doxology, bears witness to the convergence that makes for life." Brueggemann goes on to say: "The gift of life concerns particular persons rescued in their need; it also concerns the full, [free, and] generous functioning of creation."

For me this is why the remembering and honoring of our saints is so important. We look to the example and memory of people who have tried, failed, and succeeded before; who have shown perseverance of thankfulness and trust in the steadfast love of God through both difficult times and easy.

That is the way in which we know how to build our own lives of thankfulness and faith in the free and faithful steadfast love of God. We know because we have borne witness to it in the great cloud of witness when from the convergence of steadfast love and thanksgiving, fullness of life springs forth. It is an all-encompassing reminder that God has seen the distance of our wanderings and is gathering all people back home.

Regardless from what direction we have been, whatever has happened to us and those before us, somewhere within the regular reminder and practice of thankfulness and steadfast love of God, life abounds.

When moments of struggle and fear arrive, when the future holds no guarantee of better horizons, and in fact may be much worse before it gets better, what will it be that will sustain us and guide us through?

We remember the saints who have persevered and remind ourselves that just as God was traveling with them, God is traveling now with us. It is not a test of whether we have earned deliverance from the struggles of this day. There is no guarantee that it won't get far worse. But nevertheless it is a reminder of our part in the creation of fullness of life. It is a reminder that we too are building our own place within the great Amen.

Honoring Our Saints

Edith Allison	Holly Eva Charland	Sam Corpora
Stephen Ewert	Randy Fleischer	Shirley Follett
Stephen Fry	Luis Gaitán	Debbie Jamieson
Karl Loth	Don May	Nicholas Nelson
John Poindexter	David Sandoval	David Sandoval Jr.
Anne Sharyon	Kathleen Sims	Frederick Hewitt Smith
Rodney Smith	Robert Spivey	Ann Trahan
Jim Walton	Lena Ward	Floyd Flanigan
Elinor Flanigan	Hilde Errico	Sharon Ford
Randy Peck	Rossana De Marzo	Dora Alvarado
Mansulo	Gardner Hunting	Gordon Shortman

