

**New St. James Presbyterian Church  
Seventh Sunday after Pentecost  
Sunday, July 11, 2021**

**“Will Give What is Good”  
Psalm 85:8-13**

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Our Psalm in Unison, from Psalm 85, offers a hope-filled announcement of the future God makes possible. Listen again to this bold and confident affirmation of the peace and saving presence of God:

“Let me hear what God the LORD will speak,”  
announces the psalmist,  
“for he will speak peace to his people,  
to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.  
Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him,  
that his glory may dwell in our land” (vv. 8-9).

And what would it look like for God’s salvation to come near and for God’s glory to dwell among God’s people? The psalmist offers this remarkable poetic vision:

“Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;  
righteousness and peace will kiss each other.  
Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,  
and righteousness will look down from the sky” (vv. 10-11).

To describe the coming of God’s salvation and glory, the psalmist imagines God’s attributes—God’s ways of acting, God’s qualities of being, God’s divine characteristics—engaging and interacting, almost like a dance. What will it be for God’s salvation and glory to dwell with God’s people? It will be like God’s love and faithfulness spending time with each other; it will be like God’s righteousness and peace kissing each other; it will be like God’s faithfulness growing up from the earth like crops, and God’s righteousness pouring down from the sky like raindrops.

In this way, the psalmist envisions salvation as “life [conforming] to the character of God” (Mays). The psalmist looks toward a day when the ways of God—that “quartet” (Mays) of steadfast love, faithfulness, righteousness, and peace—when God’s ways will be the ways of the world, when steadfast love and faithfulness will “meet in the street,” as one paraphrase puts it, and righteousness and peace will “embrace” (MSG). So the psalmist looks toward a time when God will “give what is good” (v. 12), as “the coming of God” will bring this promise to reality (Mays):

“The LORD will give what is good,”  
the psalmist confidently announces,  
“and our land will yield its increase.  
Righteousness will go before him,  
and will make a path for his steps” (vv. 12-13).

These verses (vv. 8-13), which we shared as our Psalm in Unison, are appointed for today by the Lectionary—and I really appreciate how the Lectionary focuses our attention on these verses, encouraging us to attend to this wonderful, poetic vision. However, any of you who are very familiar with the Psalter might already be asking: but what about the first part of this psalm? The Lectionary focuses our attention on vv. 8-13, but we also need to recognize how this psalm begins (cf. Heller). Would you be surprised to learn that this psalm—with its elevated vision of hope—begins amid disillusionment and deep disappointment? As one theologian writes, this psalm is “full of lament, longing, and expectation” (van Driel), though that probably doesn’t sound like the same hope-filled psalm!

Yet listen to how our psalm begins, plaintively calling on God amid distress and looking for restoration:

“LORD, you were favorable to your land;  
you restored the fortunes of Jacob.  
You forgave the iniquity of your people;  
you pardoned all their sin. *Selah*  
You withdrew all your wrath;  
you turned from your hot anger.  
Restore us again, O God of our salvation,  
and put away your indignation toward us.  
Will you be angry with us forever?  
Will you prolong your anger to all generations?  
Will you not revive us again,  
so that your people may rejoice in you?  
Show us your steadfast love, O LORD,  
and grant us your salvation” (vv. 1-7).

A question arises: how does that exceptional vision of hope (which we find in vv. 8-13) emerge from that place of “lament” and “longing” (van Driel), and even despair (which we find in vv. 1-7)? What happens to make possible this remarkable leap from disillusionment to hope? Something that’s key in this psalm—that bridges the gap between disillusionment and hope—is memory, the memory of God’s past faithfulness. In this psalm, the psalmist takes courage by asking God to act now as God had acted in the past (Mays).

“LORD, you were favorable to your land;  
you *restored* the fortunes of Jacob” (v. 1),  
the psalmist remembers, then prays,  
“Restore us *again*, O God of our salvation,  
and put away your indignation toward us” (v. 4).

One Presbyterian minister explains it like this: this “confidence [...] in God’s future is rooted in God’s prior faithfulness. There was a day when the salvation of God was known. There were stories to tell of God’s mighty deeds. [...] Psalm 85 reminds us of the importance of memory. The testimony of the people of God through the generations is that God’s salvation has been experienced. God’s divine character has been revealed as one of steadfast love and faithfulness. God’s dreams for creation include righteousness and shalom [peace]. During times of testing or seasons of emptiness, the psalmist calls on the people of God to remember all that God has

done. God's anger has been withdrawn [...]. Sin has been pardoned [...]. This prior faithfulness of God provides reason to trust the promises of God that are yet unfulfilled" (Are).

This psalm, as that minister points out, "reminds us of the importance of memory." And memory plays a vital part in the ministry of the church—especially this kind of holy memory, memory that looks to the past faithfulness of God as a hopeful promise of the future faithfulness of God. In the reading of Holy Scripture, in preaching, and in the sacraments, we remember: we remember the history of salvation, the chronicle of God's faithfulness, first (and irrevocably) to God's people Israel, and later to the church; we remember the mighty deeds of God in the history of Israel, and in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, and in the life of the church. In confessions (including the Nicene Creed and the Apostles' Creeds, and also in more recent statement like *Living Faith*), we remember: we recount and recite the faithfulness of God, declaring what God's past faithfulness means to our present life. In doctrine, in the vital task of theology, we remember: we remember the testimony of faith given to us in Holy Scripture, and we seek ever more rigorously to receive and recognize and respond to this record of faith. A great deal of the ministry of the church is about kindling (and rekindling) the memory of faith, rehearsing and recounting the past faithfulness of God—and reflecting on what it means today.

And I think the pandemic has perhaps given us new perspectives on the connections between memory and hope. I'd suggest that, throughout the pandemic, the future that many have hoped for isn't one we've never seen, some un-glimpsed or unprecedented future, but rather a future that is—as much as possible—like the past we remember. Of course, we must recognize that the post-pandemic context will not involve some sudden return to pre-pandemic conditions; our world has changed in significant ways. Nonetheless, the dream—for fans to cheer the Blue Jays at the Rogers Centre again, for orchestras to perform before audiences again, for congregations to worship together again—all these hopes are about a future that looks similar to our memories: during the pandemic, we have dreamt of a future that is not like our present but more like our past. In some (limited) sense, then, this experience of memory and hope in the pandemic is a bit like the psalmist's vision of hope, where the future dream is a vision of a past memory. As pandemic-weary people have looked in hope toward a future that somehow resembles our past, the psalmist looks in hope toward a future when God will act in ways much like God had acted in the past.

And for us, reading this psalm in the church, our future hopes and past memory take on new meaning in Christ. The psalmist imagines a future where that "quartet" of God's attributes (Mays)—steadfast love, faithfulness, righteousness, peace—will reshape the world. And, as one scholar notes, "The church believes that the attributes of God were present and active in Jesus Christ" (Mays). This psalm, connecting memory and hope, reminds us that we live in a time in-between (Mays)—in between the coming of Christ and the coming again of Christ, with our future hope (of the coming again of Christ) emerging from our holy memory (of the coming of Christ).

The memory of the church is God in Christ coming to bring love and faithfulness and righteousness and peace, and the hope of the church is God in Christ coming again to bring love and faithfulness and righteousness and peace. And so, with hope, we may sing with the psalmist:

“The LORD will give what is good,  
and our land will yield its increase.  
Righteousness will go before him,  
and will make a path for his steps” (vv. 12-13). Amen.