

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Third Sunday of Easter
Sunday, April 19, 2026**

**“Because He Has Heard My Voice”
Psalm 116**

The Rev. Dr. David Clark

“I love the LORD, because he has heard
my voice and my supplications” (v. 1).

From these opening words, our psalm this morning is about loving God (cf. Mays). And this psalm tells a story—a story of why and how; it tells the story of why the psalmist loves God and how the psalmist loves God; it tells the story of what led the psalmist to love God and what the psalmist’s love for God looks like. And there two patterns in this psalm, almost like chapter headings, that help us hear the psalmist’s story—and the first is death and deliverance.

The psalmist’s story begins face-to-face with death. As often in the Psalms, the precise details are not spelled out—but it’s clear that the psalmist had been in a dangerous, “life-threatening trouble” (Mays): “The snares of death encompassed me,” the psalmist recalls; “the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me; I suffered distress and anguish. [...] I said, ‘I am greatly afflicted’” (vv. 3, 10).

Interpreters have wondered, had the psalmist been seriously ill (Dahood)? Had the psalmist been at war (Alter) or in captivity (Kraus)? Regardless, whatever it was that had threatened the psalmist, that threat had felt like death—death in the midst of life. As one scholar puts it: “Where distress and its tears, anguish and its stumbling, grasp the living, one is already in the sphere and power of death” (Mays).

The psalmist’s story begins with death, but it doesn’t end there. Way down deep in distress, what did the psalmist do? The psalmist prayed—bluntly, honestly: “Then I called on the name of the LORD: ‘O LORD, I pray, save my life!’” (v. 4). In Hebrew, this prayer is only four words; this is a prayer from the gut.

Death...and deliverance: after facing death and praying to God, the psalmist experiences the rescue of God. How did God rescue the psalmist? What exactly did this deliverance involve? Again, the details aren’t spelled out—but what’s clear is that this brush with death gave way to a new, surprising, experience of life. The psalmist announces: “For you have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling” (v. 8).

And amid this rescue—amid this deliverance—the psalmist learned something vital of who God is; in this experience of rescue, the psalmist discovered the mercy and the kindness of God. The psalmist announces:

“Gracious is the LORD, and righteous;
our God is merciful.

The LORD protects the simple;
when I was brought low, he saved me” (vv. 5-6).

Really, in the psalmist’s own personal experience, there’s this theological discovery—a revelation of the grace of God. The psalmist discovers that this experience of God’s grace was not isolated or individual—that this revealed the character and the heart of God.

As I said, there are these patterns in this psalm, almost like chapter headings, that help us hear the psalmist’s story. The first is death and deliverance—which led to the psalmist’s affirmation of the grace of God. And the second pattern, which flows from the first, is grace and gratitude. Death and deliverance, then grace and gratitude. Having experienced personally the grace of God, the psalmist is moved to gratitude, moved to this deeply thankful love for God:

“I love the LORD, because he has heard
my voice and my supplications” (v. 1).

The psalmist makes very clear: this love for God is a grateful response to God’s kindness, God’s grace. “I love the LORD, because”—because of God’s prior love.

And this love for God is not just some kind of mushy feeling. You know, in English, the word ‘love’ has been diluted, or at least stretched—to the point that, it’s kind of odd, but we use the same word to describe how we feel about our children and how we feel about blueberry muffins. But there’s not this same kind of dilution in biblical Hebrew, where this word for ‘love’—“I love the LORD” (אָהַב)—where this word is elsewhere used to describe Ruth’s love for Naomi (4:15), God’s love for his people Israel (Isaiah 43:4), the psalmist’s love of God’s law (119, passim). The psalmist responds to God’s grace gratefully, with a real and deeply rooted love.

And the psalm also demonstrates the forms that this “thankful love takes” (Mays). Just as God’s love for the psalmist was revealed in concrete deliverance, the psalmist’s love for God is expressed in multiple concrete ways—in fact, more ways than I can explore in a single sermon. (I mean, unless you’ve got nothing on this afternoon!) And what’s key is that in all of this—all the ways the psalmist expresses love for God—this is all grateful response to God’s prior grace:

“What shall I return to the LORD,” the psalmist asks,
“for all his bounty to me?” (v. 12).

First, the psalmist’s “thankful love” for God takes the form of “call[ing] on the name of the LORD.” The psalmist emphasizes this—actually says this twice:

“I will lift up the cup of salvation
and call on the name of the LORD [...].
I will offer to you a thanksgiving sacrifice
and call on the name of the LORD” (vv. 14, 17).

Now to “call on” the Lord’s name is a “set expression,” meaning both prayer and praise (Mays). This is about offering God worship; for the psalmist, this meant especially worship offered in the context of the temple in Jerusalem, in the “great congregation.” And the psalmist offers worship—certainly not as a way of securing God’s favour, but as a way to offer thanksgiving in response to God’s unearned favour.

Second, the psalmist's "thankful love" for God takes the form of serving God. The psalmist expresses this in terms of who the psalmist is and how the psalmist will act. With gratitude to God, the psalms identifies as God's servant:

"O LORD, I am your servant," the psalmist declares;

"I am your servant, the child of your serving girl" (v. 16).

God's servant—that's who the psalmist is, from now on. And how will this servant act? By living faithfully—or more specifically, by keeping promises to God within the worshipping community.

Twice the psalmist says this:

"I will pay my vows to the LORD

in the presence of all his people" (vv. 14, 18). "Promises made are promises kept," as one scholar puts it, as "[f]aithfulness in the keeping of promises binds the saved to the savior" (Mays).

And third, the psalmist's "thankful love" for God takes the form of delighting in God. After experiencing terrible distress, coming face to face with death, the psalmist now enjoys the peace and presence of the Lord:

"Return, O my soul, to your rest,
for the LORD has dealt bountifully with you. [...]"

I walk before the LORD

in the land of the living" (vv. 7, 9).

The psalmist's love for God is delight and joy, as the psalmist basks in peace with God.

And again, all of this—the psalmist's love for God, expressed in worship, service, and joy—all this is a grateful response to God's prior grace. Does the psalm say "I love the LORD [so that he will hear] my voice and my supplications"? No, it's the opposite:

"I love the Lord, because he has heard
my voice and my supplications" (v. 1).

God's love is prior.

This psalm teaches us what it means to live with gratitude to God. In our own tradition—Presbyterianism, which is part of what's called the Reformed tradition—in our tradition, this same rhythm of grace and gratitude is at the heart of the Christian life. A verse that really resonates with our tradition, from First John, is: "We love because [God] first loved us" (4:19).

The Christian life—everything we offer to God in worship and service—none of this is some misplaced effort to secure God's love; no, it's all our way of saying 'thank you.' The whole Christian life is our offering of thanksgiving because God loved us first. As John Calvin wrote in the 16th century: one "asks [...] why we are found in this world, why God has such a care for us, why His goodness feeds and cherishes us [...]. For we, for our part, cannot profit Him at all, neither does He require anything else of us in exchange but thanksgiving."

This psalm tells the psalmist's story, yet in many ways it tells our story, too. Death and deliverance, grace and gratitude—these are patterns for our lives and for the life of the church. Just as we have also known God's deliverance and discovered God's grace, we are likewise moved to respond to God with gratitude, moved to love the Lord by worshipping God, by serving God, and by delighting in God—because God "first loved us."

"I love the LORD, because he has heard
my voice and my supplications" (v. 1). Amen.