

First Mennonite Church Edmonton

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This week we continue our study of the MC Canada Assembly theme, “We Declare; What we have seen and heard.” In the last few weeks we’ve talked about sharing God’s good news, and to reflect on what we’ve shared, this week we look back at the message of God’s Good News in the Old Testament. I had trouble this week finding a focus for this talk, on one hand it was because there’s a long a ground to cover in the Old Testament, it’s centuries of history, centuries of God being at work in the world and with humankind; how does one sum that up... short answer, you can’t. On the other hand the history of the Old Testament is a bit of a mine field.

Let’s face it, the Old Testament is a bit thorny. On one hand we have stories of God providing for, protecting and caring for people, take for example Noah and his family, on the other hand that same story is a story of God decimating humankind with a flood, or take the story of the Hebrew people, the Israelites, on one hand God delivers them from slavery in Egypt, on the other hand we have stories of God annihilating the Egyptian army and sending plagues on the Egyptian people. I have also heard that some people have written off the Old Testament because of its violence and it’s portrayal of an angry and vindictive God. The Old Testament is a bit of a mixed bag, I will freely admit that. And each time I found myself ready to say how God was at work doing something for God’s people, taking care of, or looking after God’s people, a little voice in the back of my mind shouted out, but what if...what about...and it wasn’t wrong. And yet, I don’t think this is a reason for us to write off or discount the Old Testament as a source of God’s Good News.

Often when we think of sharing the Good News, we want to begin with Jesus. Jesus has often been portrayed as the source of God’s Good News. Which is true, and, at the same time, I think it also overlooks God’s activity and work in the world, prior to Jesus’ arrival. In some circles I’ve heard it suggested that the Old Testament is there to set the stage for Jesus; that it’s simply a history outlining how God has tried to intervene to save humankind in the past, and people didn’t listen. I think that’s a bit simplistic to reduce the Old Testament in that way, rather I like to look at the Old Testament as the story of God’s involvement with God’s created, human kind, since the beginning. The Good News in the Old Testament, at least how I read it, is that God has been present to and with humankind since God spoke humankind into being. And since the beginning God has been in love with us.

The scripture I chose for today, Psalm 107, is a delightful Psalm declaring and proclaiming for all to hear, the endurance of God's faithful and steadfast love. Throughout the psalm there are themes of compassion and forgiveness, hope and hopefulness.. There are four vignettes contained within this Psalm which present four circumstances in which people are redeemed by God. There's the story of those who wandered in desert wastes, there are those who sat in gloom and darkness, there are those who were sick and afflicted, and there were those who were in stormy waters. And as I read this Psalm this week, it was impossible for me to not hear many of familiar Old Testament stories alluded to in these four vignettes. And it reminded me, that within these stories of the Old Testament we have a witness to God's and steadfast love. This Psalm, then, becomes, for our purposes this week, a beautiful framework to hang the tapestry of stories which proclaim God's enduring saving love.

The first vignette in our Psalm tells us that **some wandered in desert waste**, and when they cried to God in their trouble, God delivered them, and led them by a straight way.

Possibly the most formative story of people in the Judeo-Christian tradition is the story of the Exodus. For people of the Jewish faith, this is perhaps the most defining story of their tradition. Each passover this story is retold, and remembered. It is also a story that is told and retold throughout the Old Testament as a touchstone for Israelites. Often offered as a 'remember when God ...' In this story God is perhaps the most tangible and present. Whether it's thorough the fantastical parting of the Red Sea, or being led by a Pillar of Fire at night or a Column of Smoke in the day, whether it's through the provision of Mana and Quail, God was there. In their wandering God was present, providing guidance and meeting the needs of God's people. This, though, wasn't the first time God has been active in this way.

Before Moses and the Israelites were led and wandered in the wilderness, God called and led two people Abram and Sarai into the wilderness and promised them that they would become the patriarch and matriarch of a new people, and, in time, God fulfilled that promise. As we read in Genesis, God was with Abram and Sarai through the high's and lows, and was faithful throughout. Even when they weren't. A professor at seminary once told me that the story of the Bible is the story of God's people missing the point, and the stories in Genesis and Exodus illustrate that well, and at the same time they illustrate, for me at least, God's enduring steadfast love. It's easy to see how in love God was with God's people.

And for us today, as we wander the assurance we can gather from these stories is that we do not wander alone. That when we enter the deserts of our lives, God is still present there with us. That just because we don't know which way to go, doesn't mean that God doesn't, nor does it mean that God does not watch over us, or have our best interests in mind. These stories, and the Psalmist remind us that God's steadfast love endures forever.

The Psalm continues that **some sat in gloom and darkness**, and when they cried to God, God saved them from their distress and brought them out of darkness and gloom, and broke their bonds asunder.

Unfortunately the Old Testament story is filled with stories of conquering and being conquered. In the Hebrew story there are at least two defining stories of enslavement and bondage. The first is the Hebrew enslavement to the Egyptians, the second, and equally formative is the Babylonian Exile.

I've already mentioned how Hebrew enslavement to the Egyptians defining to them as a people. During their enslavement, The Hebrew people cried out to God for release from bondage. And, in time, God called Moses to lead the people to freedom. God says to Moses, "I have heard their cry, I have seen the misery, I know their sufferings, and I have come to deliver them."

From the Babylonian exile the Psalms provide for us an incredible witness of faith and faithfulness. They offer us heart wrenching laments, honest confessions of sin and faithlessness, hopeful declarations of faith, and confident witnesses of God's faithfulness, all stemming from the Israelites shared traumatic experience of being a people who have lived through doom and darkness.

And for us today, while we may jump to the New Testament witness of the Paul and other imprisoned apostles, it's also good for us to remember that the people of the Old Testament had their own experiences of imprisonment, and God did see them through. While I do hope that none of us have to face imprisonment, we each may experience times of gloom and darkness, and the hope and reminder that we can take from these stories, is that in the darkness, God is still present. God was still faithful. We may not notice or see God present, but that doesn't mean that God is not there. These stories, and the Psalmist remind us that God's presence is steadfast.

Next the Psalmist declared that **some were sick and afflicted** and when they cried to God, God saved them and healed them.

Illness continues to be a time when we seek God's intervention the most. I'm sure countless prayers for healing have been lifted to God in the last number of years, particularly during this pandemic, and not just for those infected with COVID-19. Even with medical advances, we still seek God's intervention in times of medical distress, or, at the very least, we seek God's presence to journey the road of healing with us.

This is perhaps the place where my Old Testament knowledge hits a bit of a wall, if it were the New Testament, I'd have no problems

Now we could explore the story of Job...but then again, that might need to be its own sermon. The two stories that come to mind when thinking of God's intervention in matters of health are a bit of a stretch, so bear with me. And off the hop I will concede that in both of these stories, scriptures tell us that God did send these afflictions, so make of that what you will.

The first story that comes to mind, again, takes place during the Hebrew enslavement in Egypt. Have I mentioned yet how formative this story is. During the fifth and six plagues that God unleashes on the Egyptians, that of disease and boils, God protects and keeps the Hebrew people healthy, God watches over God's beloved people ensuring their health. The second story that comes to mind is while the Hebrew people are wandering in the desert, they are set upon by poisonous serpents, God commands Moses to make an image of serpent and put it on a pole, anyone who is bitten only needs to look at the pole and they will live. In both cases, God shows concern for God's people, God listens to their cries, and God offers healing.

And for us today, while I can't explicitly say that God will heal us of every affliction, that feels like I'm treading a little too close to the prosperity gospel. I can declare and witness that in times of illness or affliction, God is attentive and present to God's people. God is near, bringing peace and comfort to our spirits. God hears our cries, and God is steadfast, never abandoning us.

And finally the Psalmist reminds us that **some were in stormy waters**, and when they cried to God, God brought them out of their distress; God calmed the storm, and the waves of the sea were stilled.

Two Old Testament stories immediately come to mind when I think of God's faithful presence and stormy waters. Noah and Jonah. The sea has been, in the Old Testament tradition, has been understood to be a place of chaos. In the beginning God spoke the words of creation over the chaos of the deep. The Sea was believed to have been the domain of God, for only God could control the seas. For anyone who has ever watched the Deadliest Catch on the discovery channel, perhaps can appreciate why people would feel that only God could control the seas. The waves are unpredictable, relentless, and powerful.

In the story of Noah, we often tell the pastoral tale of Noah building the ark, and populating it with 2 of each kind of animal. However, what we often don't reflect on is the journey of that Ark over the 40 days and 40 nights. We usually don't bear much thought of the waves and weather that Noah, his family, and the occupants of the ark endured. God surely needed to be present to guide and protect the vessel containing the last life on the face of the planet. God's hand had to be at work, in navigating that vessel to safe land.

On the other hand we have the story of Jonah, who's deliberate disregard of God's call lands him in stormy seas, and yet, one can consider God's provision, in that a vessel, albeit a little fishy, is sent to take Jonah to the necessary shores. God's hand was present, not just keeping Jonah, relatively, safe, but also the crew of the ship that Jonah had chartered.

And for us today I am reminded of God's provision, guidance and protection, in the midst of stormy seas. It doesn't necessary mean that we're going to be unscathed in the midst of the storms of life, but I do believe that in the midst of the tumult and strife, God's faithfulness will lead and guide us to a calm port.

The Good News of the Old Testament is that God is faithful, God is present, God is with God's people. Through thick and thin, through joys and concerns, stormy seas, and calm waters, through deserts and lush oasis'. God is faithfully, steadfastly, present to God's people. No. Matter. What. God is there. This is quite simply God's Good News. That's the Good News that we can share about God. God is active and present, from the beginning until the end of time.

Our Psalm ends with these words: "Let those who are wise give heed to these things, and consider the steadfast love of the Lord."

May we remember, regardless of where we find ourselves, God is faithful, God is present,  
God's steadfast love endures forever.

Amen.