

3RD WEDNESDAY IN ADVENT

DECEMBER 18, 2013

FROM CREATION TO CROSS, MAY GOD BE PRAISED

Pastor Jim Dunn

Psalm 136

His Steadfast Love Endures Forever

- 136 Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever.
- 2 Give thanks to the God of gods,
for his steadfast love endures forever.
- 3 Give thanks to the Lord of lords,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
- 4 to him who alone does great wonders,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
- 5 to him who by understanding made the heavens,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
- 6 to him who spread out the earth above the waters,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
- 7 to him who made the great lights,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
- 8 the sun to rule over the day,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
- 9 the moon and stars to rule over the night,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
- 10 to him who struck down the firstborn of Egypt,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
- 11 and brought Israel out from among them,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
- 12 with a strong hand and an outstretched arm,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
- 13 to him who divided the Red Sea in two,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
- 14 and made Israel pass through the midst of it,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
- 15 but overthrew[a] Pharaoh and his host in the Red Sea,
for his steadfast love endures forever;

16 to him who led his people through the wilderness,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
17 to him who struck down great kings,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
18 and killed mighty kings,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
19 Sihon, king of the Amorites,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
20 and Og, king of Bashan,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
21 and gave their land as a heritage,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
22 a heritage to Israel his servant,
for his steadfast love endures forever.
23 It is he who remembered us in our low estate,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
24 and rescued us from our foes,
for his steadfast love endures forever;
25 he who gives food to all flesh,
for his steadfast love endures forever.
26 Give thanks to the God of heaven,
for his steadfast love endures forever.

Colossians 2:6-7

Alive in Christ

6 Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, 7 rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

How many of you love the old movies, especially the classics you see on television this time of year? Well, then you would have no trouble retelling the story of an entertainer named Bob Wallace and a singer named Betty Haynes. You would tell me how they ended up together at the same deserted Vermont ski lodge for the holidays. You would tell me how Bob Wallace cured Betty Haynes' insomnia. You might even sing a few lines of "when you're worried, and you can't sleep." It's exactly that part of the movie when Bing Crosby sings to Rosemary Clooney that I want to call to your attention. "When you're worried, and you can't sleep," what do you do? That's how the song goes. "Just count your blessings instead of sheep."

Our American culture can admit that gratitude for blessings is important. Even though most people are a little confused about the source of those blessings. The song essentially says that gratitude can hush the voices of worry and anxiety inside your head; counting your blessings will cause calmness and contentment to soothe you into a peaceful sleep.

Well, we might want to be careful about comparing Bing Crosby to St. Paul, but Paul also talks about counting your blessings. He writes to the Colossian Christians, pointing them to the source of all blessings: ***“As you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so keep walking in Him, now that you are firmly rooted in and are being built upon Him, and constantly being confirmed in your faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.”***

Paul's concern is not that the Colossian Christians will spend another sleepless night because of worry and anxiety. His concern is more serious. Someone had been trying to convince them that having Jesus was not enough. So, Paul urged them to continue to walk in gratitude. Abounding in thanksgiving would remind them of all that was theirs in Christ Jesus. If they walked in gratitude to Christ, then who could lead them astray?

We are vulnerable to the same temptations. This time of year we may spend more time counting wishes instead of blessings. Perhaps, having Jesus is not enough. Lately too we have been bombarded with worry and anxiety about the health of fellow members or loved ones. Serious health issues, life threatening health issues can make our thankfulness sound hollow, even to ourselves.

Ancient Israel certainly struggled with this problem. Who can forget their grumbling in the wilderness? On their long walk, they did not always walk in gratitude. Their grumbling did not end just because they reached the Promised Land. For their protection, the writer of Psalm 136 provided the same cure Paul prescribed for the Colossian Christians. Walk in gratitude. Abound in thanksgiving. ***“O give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good, for His steadfast love endures forever.”***

In this Psalm, the writer does not go into all the sordid details of how Israel ended up as slaves in Egypt. That story began with jealousy between Joseph and his brothers. It was a story of hatred, pride, and the attempted murder of Joseph, before they gave in and sold him to slave traders headed for Egypt. (A sign of things to come, perhaps?)

The writer assumes the reader remembers those details as he writes about the steadfast love of God, who brought Israel out of that slavery, who all along that long walk to the Promised Land held Israel together, kept Israel's story moving forward, kept Israel and her faith from disintegrating into the desert sand.

Here is the God who regarded the low estate of His people living in slavery, and who would regard the low estate of a young virgin. Here is the God who gives food to every creature, who humbles Himself every day to be cook and server and busboy for every living creature and who would humble Himself to be born to that lowly virgin.

Here is the God whose steadfast love for us stretches from creation to the cross, from the Exodus to the empty tomb, from the Nativity to the new creation!!

His blessing, His steadfast love, brought us up out of our slavery to the devil, death, and sin, and He will hold us together on our walk towards the Promised Land, He will keep us moving forward, He will keep our feet from going astray, He will keep our faith from disintegrating.

His steadfast love inspires us to not merely count our blessings but to consider the source of all our blessings. His steadfast love leads us to walk in gratitude, and should the tears in our eyes cause us to stumble, He will regard our low estate, He will remember us, and He will let nothing separate us from His steadfast love.

Amen