

February 10, 2019

## Lesson 11: Pondering God's Steadfast Love

Scripture: Psalm 48: 1-3, 9-14

### Context:

The closing section for this quarter's lesson on love focuses on the psalms. Many of the psalms are poetry conveying the depth of God's love. Using allusions from the ancient world, the psalms speak of God's steadfastness and how far it reaches.

The first psalm to dive into is Psalm 48. As we look at the psalm, we are to remember that psalms are the praise and proclamation and prayer of those who believe that the confession "The Lord reigns" is a present and continuous state.<sup>1</sup> This particular psalm contains the allusion to "*The City of God*." In the scripture text it is named as Mount Zion, the place God chooses for God's presence as the earthly counterpart to the heavenly throne and palace.<sup>2</sup> Throughout the psalms, "*The City of God*," or Mount Zion, is referred to as a place where humans come into contact with the divine.

Of course, from later writings, one comes to know that Mount Zion refers to Jerusalem. This small, unimposing capital is the place where God dwells and for the congregation it is where the faith comes alive.<sup>3</sup> It is here where the people feel that God dwells with them as they think of the mountain upon which it is built. The origins of the psalm probably come from pilgrims as they stood before the temple and prepared for a procession around the city.<sup>4</sup> The psalm would help guide the people as they looked at both the natural landscape and the buildings built to honor God. It would express the deep joy and awe at seeing such a place.

An interesting note is that the city of Jerusalem is never named. Instead the mount is located in the "far north," with original translations pinpointing Mount Zion as also the summit of Zaphon, the cosmic mountain where El and Baal exercised their kingship in the mythology of the Canaanite religion.<sup>5</sup> Thus, this city and mount is one where the true God of all overtakes and reigns, the place where the ark and temple sit.

The psalm paints this place as one where God's power and love is evident. From the temple to the towers and fortification, this city represents the impenetrability of God's love. Nothing can stop it. God is forever at work in the city with its goodness being bestowed upon even the surrounding towns around the city. As people view and visit the city, they are reminded of God's mighty power and love that is always faithful.

### Application

When I read this psalm, I couldn't help but think of the hymn, "Marching to

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<sup>1</sup> James L. Mays, "Psalms," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press; Louisville, KY, 2011), 30 -31.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 189.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 189.

Zion,” which is 733 in the United Methodist Hymnal. The refrain is: “We’re marching to Zion, beautiful, beautiful Zion; we’re marching upward to Zion, the beautiful city of God.” It is a hymn written by Isaac Watts with the refrain added by Robert Lowry. We are given the image of marching towards this beautiful celestial city where God dwells and resides.

While of course poetry and hymns are meant to take us into the presence of God and give us a glimpse of the divine, there are also ties to the world we live in today. Marching to Zion is not just about “going to heaven when we die.” Marching to Zion is about experiencing God in the here and today. For the psalmist, this experience is found in looking at the city in which they feel God’s presence. The city of Jerusalem epitomizes that city where God would dwell completely with the large temple, the fortress walls, and the tall towers.

Last year, I got to look at Jerusalem from atop a mountain. The view was breathtaking as I thought of all the people who have traveled to see this mount where momentous world events have happened. It took my breath away and sent shivers down my back.

While we should always be careful not to make them into idols, buildings and places can help us in our faith journey realize God’s steadfastness. Of course we know that eventually Jerusalem was razed over several times and the people watched in horror as their temple was destroyed and the walls were torn down. They were stripped of the very things that reminded them of God’s goodness.

Yet that did not change the place where they stood. This was still the valley where Abraham brought Isaac and the same city that David came and made his capital to unite a divided country. It was holy ground regardless of the buildings that sat there.

As I read this text I think of all my “holy places.” These are the places where I know that God dwells for me. Some of them are buildings like Yielding Chapel at Birmingham-Southern, my alma mater as well as the churches where I grew up and family churches of my grandparents and great-grandparents. These are places where I felt the power of the Lord. Like the psalmist I see revealing glimpses of God like the sturdy stones of the building, the beauty of the stained glass windows, and of course the altar rails and tables. I think of the words said there and the people who have been on those journeys with me in those places.

Yet there are other places that I feel God like the peaks of mountains in central Alabama and Tennessee and the beaches along the coast. In my mind I see camps that are in the great outdoors and have a simple beauty to them. I think of kayaks on rivers and the beauty and steadfastness of God in the banks and trees lining the sides. Of course there are certain places where I feel God more strongly and it usually comes from a memory or an event that took place even in the constantly changing landscape.

What are places or locations where you feel the presence of God and the love of God? These are the places you run to when you feel like you need that protection from the outside world when things have become so rough you’re not sure where you need to go. If you don’t have them, I hope you can find them. In fact I encourage you to search for them and to make time to be in those spaces so you can feel protected and inspired to face whatever comes your way.

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