

## **The One Who Keeps Faith Forever**

Psalm 146

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Every so often I mention the word "lectionary" in preaching and it is good to revisit those words that we often hear now and then so that we are all on the same page, so to speak!

A lectionary is simply a collection of scripture readings that are used for regular and specific worship services over time. This practice is found in both the Jewish and Christian traditions. The lectionary collection that we follow is called the Common Lectionary and it is used by many of the traditional or mainline churches like the Methodists, Presbyterians, and Disciples as well as us. Lutherans, Episcopalians, and Roman Catholics generally follow this lectionary also, but each of those groups has specific differences from time to time that are unique to each of their traditions.

Here at St. Paul's we use worship bulletins that come from our denomination, the United Church of Christ, and on the back page we can see the one lectionary reading that is lifted up for that particular Sunday. Each week there are four lectionary readings – one from the Hebrew Scriptures (or the Old Testament), one from the Psalms, one from the Gospels, and one from the Christian Scriptures (or the New Testament).

We usually only read one or two of these four Bible passages each week. And this week we are not following that selected reading! Sometimes, like today, the selected reading comes from a section of a longer story – and this often happens in the Hebrew Scriptures. When this occurs I don't always follow the selected lectionary choice because it usually assumes that those of us listening are present every Sunday over several weeks. And the truth is that just isn't the case.

I've found that to be an issue with church school curriculums also over the years. They often build upon a story assuming that the children are present each Sunday over several weeks. Again, whether or not that was ever the common experience, it isn't true now. In my experience, I've found that church school and preaching need to be "stand alone" experiences. They need to be something that is not dependent on what you heard last week or waiting for a conclusion next week.

So today we actually are still following the lectionary, but reading the Psalm instead. One of the gifts of this lectionary practice is that it pushes the preacher to deal with texts that he or she might not choose on their own. And that is certainly true for me.

The Psalms are very much worth reading and pondering. They are sort of the hymnbook for ancient Israel, with the original experience being one of singing them rather than reading them. And they also cover the whole range of human experience from lament to anger to thoughtful questions to unabashed praise.

Earlier this spring I attended a series of lectures here in Seattle by visiting United Church of Christ theologian Walter Brueggemann. His theme was about these Psalms and he called them the original recovery program. One of his points was that they are so rich in the anguish as well as the joy of life, that they are so real, that they are a good way to acknowledge the realities of our own lives – warts and messiness and all.

A common theme, Brueggemann named, is that after all of the cries and laments and questioning – it takes God (or a higher power) to deliver hope and promise. Or, in my own contemporary words, something like “this whole living thing is so much bigger and harder and more complicated than I can ever figure out on my own, I need help and wisdom and faithfulness to make it through – I need you, O God.”

Today’s Psalm is almost at the end – number 146 out of 150. There is an admonishment saying “*do not put your trust in nobles, in mortals, in whom there is no help.*” There is also the threat of punishment saying “*but the way of the wicked God brings to ruin.*”

But most importantly there is promise as well, praising a God who “*executes justice for the oppressed, who gives food to the hungry, [who] sets prisoners free, [who] lifts up those who are bowed down, [and who] upholds the orphan and the widow.*”

Over the years as I’ve read and reread this Psalm I’ve come to one phrase within it over and over again, one that stands out above all of the others for me. And that phrase is the one about a God “*who keeps faith forever.*”

What an amazing promise! We are promised a God who has a heart as big as a barn, shoulders as wide as a super tanker, a memory as great as that of an elephant, and a faithfulness that never runs out. A faithfulness that never runs out...

And that is a great comfort for me. I can rail at God when I don’t feel that my prayers are answered. I can forget all about God when things are going great. I can argue with God when I’m feeling that life isn’t fair. I can pout in front of God when I’m simply tired or depressed. And God remains faithful. God remains present. God remains without carrying a grudge. God remains.

The one who keeps faith forever.

The rest of us have our moments when we come through, when we go the extra mile, or when we remember that God first loved us and so we pay it back or pay it forward. And sometimes this can come at the most unexpected times.

Several years ago I was sitting and talking with Betty Behmke who is a member of Plymouth Church downtown. Her ministry in that setting at that time was to facilitate the use of a canvass labyrinth that the church had raised money to purchase a few years before. It was a similar version of the one that Janet Hall and others created here, but it was the same pattern – that from the Chartres Cathedral in France.

I was there that Saturday morning in the church Social Hall, there the labyrinth had been set up for anyone to come and walk. A teacher and about five or six children came by. They were from a class in a local alternative school. One of the girls was in a wheelchair. They started to walk and the girl in the chair was being wheeled along the patterned path. It was a quiet atmosphere with soft classical music playing in the background, so rather than speaking she signaled to be wheeled back out of the labyrinth. Once out she got out of the chair and started crawling along the labyrinth's path.

Within moments all of the other children exited the labyrinth. I immediately went to a negative space – were they going to make fun of her? What was going on?

And within another moment they all very respectfully started crawling the labyrinth pattern, too. They paced it so that no one passed each other and no one seemed to be hurried or harried or waiting. It was an amazing 45 minutes of watching an extended holy moment.

I felt like praising God in the form of a Psalm as much as I ever have. It was a moment of paying it back and paying it forward, a moment of true community, a moment when the issues that separate us and are too often demeaning were transformed, a moment of faithfulness and of hope.

*“The one who keeps faith forever”* can inspire the rest of us to have our own moments when we become better people than who we usually are – like those children on the Plymouth labyrinth many years ago.

And each month when we gather for communion when we experience the ritual and hear the words “the bread of life” and “the cup of hope” we are reminded of *“the one who keeps faith forever.”* Thank God. *“Praise be to God!”* Amen.

## **Psalm 146**

Praise be to God!

Praise God, O my soul!

I will praise God as long as I live;

I will sing praises to my God all my life long.

Do not put your trust in nobles, in mortals,  
in whom there is no help.

When their breath departs,  
they return to the earth;  
on that very day their plans perish.

Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,  
whose hope is in the Sovereign their God,  
who made heaven and earth, the sea,  
and all that is in them;  
who keeps faith forever;  
who executes justice for the oppressed;  
who gives food to the hungry.

God sets the prisoners free;  
God opens the eyes of those who cannot see.

God lifts up those who are bowed down;  
God loves the righteous.

God watches over the strangers;  
and upholds the orphan and the widow,  
but the way of the wicked God brings to ruin.

God will reign forever, your God, O Zion,  
for all generations.

Praise be to God!