

July 11, 2021  
Psalm 85:8-13

Pentecost 7  
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

## **“Remembrance of Past Faithfulness”**

“Let me hear what God the LORD will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.”

Toward the end of my final year of high school, I got a summer job in a nearby community, which meant that I needed to buy a car to drive back and forth to work. In my excitement and haste to get a set of wheels, I bought the first car I saw advertised in our local newspaper: a 1972 Ford Pinto, which has the notorious reputation as one of the worst cars ever built. While I was at first excited to buy my first car, it turned out to be a never-ended source of trouble; I was stranded on the side of the road numerous times and became well-acquainted with the local auto club and tow truck drivers. My experience with this less-than-reliable vehicle taught me an important lesson that has guided me in subsequent car purchases; before I buy a car, I do research about its record of reliability, turning to trusted sources like Consumer’s Reports. Good experiences with certain automobile brands have led me to have trust in them, and the two cars we currently own reflect the trust that we have been able to place in these car brands. My foolish experience in buying the wrong car became a valuable lesson in placing my trust in something that is reliable, that will not let me down or leave me stranded on the side of the road.

Experience has taught us the importance of reliability, on placing our confidence only in things that are trustworthy, on that which has stood the test of time and proven itself to deliver on what has been promised. This is true not only in products we buy but in people who play important roles in our lives; we look for reliability in doctors, accountants, plumbers, contractors, and other professionals whose services we rely upon. Before we sign a contract or engage in business with a company, we want to know their “track record,” the way in which others have experienced working with them. From word of mouth to personal recommendations to websites that rate all sorts of professionals, we want to know if a person who seeks our business is someone who will prove beneficial to us, someone whose word and work is trustworthy and true.

The faith that we share as people of God is built on a foundation of trust, on the Word of God and the promises of our Lord that have been fulfilled in previous generations.

The testimony of the Bible and of our ancestors in faith is to God's reliability, that the God's Word is trustworthy, that God always fulfills the promises that God makes to God's people. God's people sang their praises to God because *"the word of the LORD is upright, and all his work is done in faithfulness"* (Psalm 33:4). Even in the depths of deepest despair, the people remembered God's history of faithfulness and cried out *"O Israel, hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem"* (Psalm 130:7). The prophet Habakkuk declares his trust in the Lord even amid great calamity and failure that surrounds him:

- *"Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails, and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will exult in the God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, and makes me tread upon the heights."*  
– Habakkuk 3:17-19.

The one who receives the vision of Revelation on the island of Patmos is instructed to *"write this, for these words are trustworthy and true."* (Revelation 21:5). Our faith is built upon our confidence in the trustworthiness of the Lord, on the Word of God that is *"a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path"* (Psalm 119:105). Our confidence (a word that comes from the Latin phrase *con fide*, "with faith") is based on our shared experience of God's reliability, that God is *"our help in ages past, our hope for years to come; our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home."* (ELW Hymn 632).

Our psalm for this morning is a communal prayer for help in a time of crisis in which God's people cry out to the Lord in confidence that God will hear their pleas and will come to their rescue. Its striking portrayal of God's promise of peace and salvation is delivered amid an experience of distress that has followed a more favorable time. Psalm 85 is a corporate prayer for help in the early post-exilic era, when the people of Israel returned to their homeland after suffering through the bondage of slavery in Babylon. While there was great rejoicing in their liberation and homecoming, the result was not that they lived "happily ever after," because their return to their home was often a difficult experience for them. They remembered the experience of being freed from bondage when the Lord was *"favorable to your land, you restored the fortunes of Jacob. You forgave the iniquity of your people, you pardoned their sin"* (85:1-2). The phrase "restored the fortunes" is often used to describe Israel's return from exile (*"For the days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will restore the fortunes of my people, Israel and Judah, says the LORD, and I will bring them back*

*to the land that I gave to their ancestors and they shall take possession of it”* (Jeremiah 30:3). Psalm 85 may have originated as a prayer of the people amid the disappointing circumstances that accompanied the early days of their return to the land of promise, as they cried out *“restore us again, O God of our salvation, and put away your indignation toward us”* (85:4). The people clearly stand in need of God’s grace and ask if God will once again show God’s steadfast love (*hesed*) and once again give the people salvation: *“Will you not revive us again, so that your people may rejoice in you? Show us your steadfast love, O LORD, and grant us your salvation”* (85:6-7). They await the fulfillment of the promise spoken through the prophet Zechariah: *“Thus says the LORD of hosts: My cities shall again overflow with prosperity; the LORD will again comfort Zion and again choose Jerusalem”* (Zechariah 1:17).

The gifts for which the people of God prayed – steadfast love and salvation – are promised through the words of an individual voice, perhaps that of a prophet or liturgical preacher, who delivers the good news of peace and calls for a response: *“Let me hear what God the LORD will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts”* (85:8). The preacher proclaims the good news that God’s *“salvation is at hand”* (85:9) and that steadfast love is one of the four personified attributes in which *“steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other”* (85:10). These gifts will be experienced by those who “fear” God (“fear” used in the sense of holding one in greatest awe and reverence, the same sense in which Luther uses “fear” in the *Small Catechism*: *“We are to fear and love God ...”*). But in a deeper sense, the remarkable gifts that are described by the psalmist exceed any possibility of human merit or accomplishment (*“And all of this comes out of pure, fatherly goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness of mine at all”* – *Small Catechism*). The focus is clearly on God’s character and activity; steadfast love and faithfulness are at the heart of God’s character throughout the Hebrew Scriptures:

- “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation ...” – Exodus 34:6-7.
- “All the paths of the LORD are steadfast love and faithfulness, for those who keep his covenant and decrees.” – Psalm 25:10.
- “Return to the LORD your God, who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing.” – Joel 2:13.

Righteousness is the fundamental policy that God wills and enacts as sovereign of the universe (“*He will judge the world with righteousness, and the people with equity*” – Psalm 98:9). The result is peace (*shalom*), “*the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, [that] will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus*” (Philippians 4:7).

- “The psalmist is listening for the word of *shalom* that God will speak to God’s people. He or she anticipates a word of steadfast love and faithfulness, of righteousness and peace. In the midst of communal distress, someone remembers the promises of God and becomes the speaker of holy promises.” – Tom Are, Jr.

The repetition of the word “will” communicates absolute confidence in God’s ability and willingness to act on behalf of God’s people: “*The LORD will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase. Righteousness will go before him, and will make a path for his steps*” (85:12-13). The repetition of “righteousness” (*sedeq*) emphasizes the point that God *will* set things right: “*The vivid poetic description affirms, in essence, that God will be with and for the people; God’s ‘glory,’ symbolic of God’s presence, will ‘dwell in our land’*” (J. Clinton McCann, Jr.). This confidence in God’s salvation, the sure and certain faith that God will fulfill what God has promised to God’s people, remains the foundation of the faith that has given people strength and assurance in even the most difficult of circumstances:

- “Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.” – Isaiah 40:5.
- “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the LORD has risen upon you. For darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you.” – Isaiah 60:1-2.
- “I will make with them a covenant of peace and banish wild animals from the land, so that they may live in the wild and sleep in the woods securely.” – Ezekiel 34:25.

The experience of God’s presence is the essence of “what is good”: “*For the LORD God is a sun and shield; he bestows favor and honor. No good thing does the LORD withhold from those who walk uprightly. O LORD of hosts, happy is everyone who trusts in you.*” (Psalm 84:11-12).

The confidence the promise speaker has in God's future is rooted in God's prior faithfulness. Psalm 85 reminds us of the importance of memory; the testimony of the people of God through the generations is that God's salvation has been experienced. The prior faithfulness of God provides reason to trust the promises of God that are yet unfilled. *"The act of memory ... propels the people of God to hope for God's new and promised tomorrow"* (Tom Are, Jr.).

- "Therefore, because truth has sprung up from the earth, we have the result that righteousness looks down on us from heaven. For the fact that Christ came and was born was sheer promise and not merit. And by this very thing we are justified, namely, by His coming. It is not so that we first become righteous and deserving, and by this fact God was truthful, that He sent Him. Otherwise truth would spring out of heaven and righteousness would look up from the earth, which is the greatest possible perversion ... But it is His righteousness, which is in heaven, that is responsible for our coming to Him. And thus through truth He comes to us, and through righteousness we come to Him." – Martin Luther, *First Lectures on the Psalms*.

This week, I will have the privilege of presiding at the Sacrament of Holy Baptism, through which we are *"reborn children of God and made members of the church which is the body of Christ."* While the way in which we celebrate baptisms has changed during this pandemic, our celebrations and the benefits of Holy Baptism remain the same: through water and the Word we are claimed as God's beloved children, *"sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever."* We believe that baptism is a sacrament in which God unconditionally incorporates us into the Body of Christ and promises to abide with us forever; therefore, it is most appropriate for us to baptize infants and young children, since the gift of baptism comes with no preconditions and is not dependent on our assent to receive it. But we do place great responsibilities on the adults who bring their children to the waters of Holy Baptism; we charge them to bring their children to worship, to teach them the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments, and to place in their hands the Holy Scriptures, *"so that your children may learn to trust God, proclaim Christ through word and deed, care for others and the world God made, and work for justice and peace."* (ELW Holy Baptism). We know that the Word of God is the greatest gift that we can bestow on our children, for it contains the message of hope and assurance that has been passed down to us from our ancestors in faith who experienced the confidence that comes from the trustworthiness and reliability of the Word of God in the most difficult and challenging of circumstances. It is the remembrance of God's faithfulness in the past that gives us the strength to live every

day in the comfort of God's holy and certain hope, the assurance that *"neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."* (Romans 8:38-39).

In one of the shortest books in the Bible, the author of the letter of Jude encourages his readers to place their trust in *"him who is able to keep you from falling, and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing, to the only God our Saviour, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen."* (Jude 24-25). These words became the inspiration for Martin Luther King, Jr's sermon *Our God is Able* in which he encourages those engaged in the difficult task of working for civil rights to place their trust in the Lord who has proven trustworthy to people who faced struggles in their work in the name of the name of the Lord:

- "Let this affirmation be our ringing cry. It will give us courage to face the uncertainties of the future. It will give our tired feet new strength as we come together to stride forward toward the city of freedom. When our days become dreary with low hovering clouds and our nights become even darker than a thousand midnights, let us remember that there is a great benign Power in the universe whose name is God, and God is able to make a way out of no way, and to turn our dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows. This our hope for becoming better people. This is our mandate for seeking to make a better world."

Wisdom and experience have taught us to place our trust and confidence in that which has proved to be reliable and trustworthy. As we walk together into a future that is filled with uncertainty and may provoke anxieties and doubts among us, may we always remember the faith of our ancestors who knew that their trust in God's Word was never in vain, who came to rely on the steadfast love of God as a source of *"strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow."* May the Word of God be the source of our strength and hope in these times in which we are called to be God's people, and may we strive to *"hear what God the LORD will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to this faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts."* May ours be a remembrance of God's faithfulness in the past, and may that faithfulness be the source of our hope in the future into which God calls and leads us as God's holy, beloved people.

Amen.