

Covenant Love

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Date: 28 July 2019

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- [0 : 0 0] Welcome to the Church of the Advent. There's a lot of people who haven't been here in a while. To this evening service at the Columbia Heights Parish.
- If you're new, if this is your first time, you should know this is a special Sunday. Typically on Sundays we've had a morning and an evening worship service in two different locations. And this evening we've come together.
- This will be our last evening together here in this location. And next week we'll move to a new location on Sunday mornings. More about that later. But what I thought, if this is our last time together in this space, how about one last Lord of the Rings sermon illustration?
- Yes? Good. And for some of you I know that was a Tolkien sugar warning. So you're welcome. So in reflecting on the trilogy, The Lord of the Rings, the English scholar and professor Tom Shippey asks, what is the pivotal moment of The Lord of the Rings?
- In his opinion, it comes towards the end of the second book, The Two Towers. Frodo and his companion Sam are engaged in the impossible quest of sneaking into Mordor.
- [1 : 2 5] Their mission is to throw the One Ring into the cracks of doom in order to destroy it and thus overthrow the evil Lord Sauron. It all sounds kind of silly when I say it up here, but it's really a lot of fun to read.
- They haven't thought of what to do should they actually succeed. It's a suicide mission they're engaged in. And in this particular moment, they find themselves in the dark, wicked, lifeless mountains of Mordor.
- And they begin to talk of tales. And Sam asks, I wonder what sort of tale we've fallen into. And then he realizes that the light in the vial that Frodo is carrying comes from a star.
- And that star was once a gem that was set into the sky. And before that, that gem and two other gems like it had been warred over. And these three gems had been created thousands and thousands of years earlier.
- And Sam says, to think it, we're in the same tale still. It's going on. Don't the great tales never end?
- [2 : 3 4] Realizing the part that they're playing, Sam imagines someone saying someday, let's hear about Frodo and the ring. Frodo was very brave. The famousest of the hobbits.
- And then Frodo laughs. A long, clear laugh from his heart. Such a sound had not been heard in those places since Sauron came to Middle-earth.
- To Sam, suddenly it seemed as if all the stones were listening and the tall rocks leaning over them. You see, that laughter dispelled some of Sauron's chief weapons.
- Gloom, depression, and defeatism. Why did Frodo laugh? Where did that joy come from in so dreadful a time and place?
- Perhaps it was the realization of how ordinary he was. That it amused him to think of himself as a subject of a tale.
- [3 : 4 5] Perhaps because he was self-forgetful. And I think this is what Psalm 100 does for us. It takes our eyes off of ourselves.

So before we look at Psalm 100, verse 5, let's pray. Father, we would want to see you.

There are so many things around us that distract us. There are so many things around us that beg our attention that shouldn't. There are so many things around us that fill us with gloom and depression and defeatism.

And so we come to your word. We come needing to hear from it. To be filled by it. To be transformed by it. Lord, we would know you and your steadfast love through this passage tonight.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. So Psalm 100 takes us from looking at ourselves and on to God.

[4 : 50] Notice that it's like a magnifying glass. Can we pull it up? Have you noticed that God is the subject and object of every verse? Verse 1.

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth. Serve the Lord with gladness. Come into his presence with singing. Verse 2. Know that the Lord, he is God.

That was verse 3. Verse 4. Enter his gates with thanksgiving. So why does it focus on God? Well, what is the basis for singing and serving and blessing and thanking?

It is for the Lord is good. This is in verse 5. For the Lord is good. His steadfast love endures forever. And his faithfulness to all generations.

Now what is translated here as steadfast love is the Hebrew word *chesed*. *Chesed*. There's no exact translation for this word.

[5 : 49] It could also be translated as mercy or loving kindness or covenant love or unfailing love. Would you sing for joy?

Would you sing for joy? Would you want to be able to laugh in the valley of the shadow of death? Then place yourself in a story that is larger than your own.

And what is the plot of this story according to Psalm 100? It's God *chesed*. This tale. This true tale of the universe that has been told since the beginning of time.

Its plot is God's steadfast love endures forever. Now I think some of us have grown up in the church with misconceptions about the God of the Old Testament.

As if there was a separate God of the Old Testament and a God of the New Testament. And we may have thought that this God of the Old Testament presents himself primarily as harsh and aloof.

[6 : 51] And then in the New Testament we learn that God is love. Well, the Hebrews always understood as God being love. That's in his name.

In Exodus chapter 34, Moses ascends Mount Sinai to make two new stone tablets on which the terms of God's covenant with Israel would be written.

And as he did with the Ten Commandments the first time, God first names himself. And what is his name? This is the account. We read that the Lord descended in the cloud and stood with Moses there and proclaimed the name of the Lord.

The Lord passed before him and proclaimed the Lord. The Lord. A God merciful and gracious. Slow to anger.

And abounding in *chesed* and faithfulness. Keeping steadfast love for thousands. Forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.

[7 : 55] But who will by no means clear the guilty. God would prove his steadfast love over and over. Rescuing Israel from Egypt.

Feeding Israel as they wandered through the desert. Going before her and conquering her enemies. Settling them in a land flowing with milk and honey. And even after Israel turns away from God time and time again.

Landing her in big troubles with its enemies around her. God always answered and rescued when Israel cried for help. Now I know from my conversations with you.

That many of you have a hard time squaring God's goodness with what you see in the world. You've been in parts of the world where injustice and cruelty and desolation run unchecked.

Recent history suggests to you that God isn't interested in this world. And your own history feels that maybe God is disinterested.

[9 : 03] Because you've experienced one betrayal after another. Where is God? And is he good? Well you should know two things.

The first is that you should note that the Bible's poets feel you. Despite personal trauma. Despite seeing their cities and their country destroyed and razed.

The poets still maintained a trust in God's goodness. We're given their prayers to give voice to our own doubts and worship. Listen to the words of the prophet Jeremiah in the book of Lamentations.

I am the man who has seen affliction under the rod of his wrath. He has made my flesh and my skin waste away.

He has broken my bones. He has besieged and enveloped me with bitterness and tribulation. My soul is bereft of peace. I have forgotten what happiness is. But this I call to mind.

[10 : 06] Therefore I have hope. The chesed of the Lord never ceases. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. The covenant love of the Lord never ceases.

His mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness. How were Israel's poets able to keep God's chesed, his steadfast love, dominant in their field of vision?

Well, as a people, Israel had a daily, weekly, and annual rhythm of regularly rehearsing and reenacting the story of their deliverance. God's faithfulness was constantly kept in view.

And this song would have us do that too. Perhaps daily at the close of the day before you drift to sleep, recount ways you sensed his presence and activity in your life.

The Psalms would encourage us to have us ask God to where he was when he didn't feel present. When you felt drained of energy, frustrated, irritated, angry, sad, sorrowful, alone, isolated, unaccepted, fragmented, less than your best self.

[11 : 33] And as we keep God's steadfast love in our field of vision, we often see how he was present in those moments too, working on our behalf.

For those of you who wrestle with squaring God's goodness with the evil and injustice around you, you should note a second thing. So first is the Bible is full of poets who feel the same thing and wrestled with it and still kept God's covenant love in view.

And the second is that ultimately Psalm 100 points to the same place as the whole Old Testament. Everything, indeed the same place that the story of the world points to, is indeed the cross.

The Son of God who doesn't remain aloof from injustice, but submits to it on the cross. The Son of God condescended to us, suffering the grossest of injustices.

His body ground up by the gears of a corrupt system, abandoned by those closest to him. It's on the cross that he makes provision for forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and by no means clearing the guilty.

[12 : 54] For on the cross he suffers the punishment that was meant for someone else. It was meant for me. It was meant for you. Here, God's hatred is most fully expressed.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him might not perish, but have eternal life. In a moment we're going to share a meal.

And in this meal, our field of vision can become completely consumed by God and his perfect love. His unfailing love.

This is not a feast. Excuse me. This is a feast. It's not a funeral. This is a table. It's not a tomb. It's a place to express our joy.

It's a place to laugh. And may our spirit-filled laughter dispel the enemy's weapons of gloom and defeatism.

[13 : 55] For this meal places us in a much larger story than our own little stories. Here, in this story, God becomes the main character. And the petty, egocentric scripts that we walked in through those doors with are torn to pieces.

And we're handed a new script in which we have new roles. And it's in this tale, this true tale, where we forget ourselves.

It's here that we truly become ourselves to think it. The true tale that God's been telling since the beginning of time. We're in the same tale still.

Before we do that, you have words to add to this sermon. You have words to add to this psalm. Psalm 100 is general, okay?

There's several other psalms that give specific reasons to praise God. God is on Zion. God is a king. God has rescued us. But in this song, we're supposed to read our situation to the text.

[15 : 05] Not to add one theoretical interpretation of Scripture onto another, but to be interpreted by it. So let's do that now. We're going to make known together how God has been good to us and to the church of the Advent.

I feel like this is exactly what I at least needed to hear tonight. You know, I came here with a lot on my mind.

You know, we're right on the cusp of change as a community. And change is always hard. I mean, even if you're somebody who, you know, on the bell curve is very excited about change and you're a kind of early adopter type, when push comes to shove and the rubber meets the road and you're on that eve of change, it's always hard.

There are unforeseen challenges. There are unforeseen challenges. You know, sort of forging ahead into the unknown always brings with it a certain amount of anxiety. And so, I feel like this is exactly what I needed to hear.

I feel like I needed to be reminded that at the end of the day, whether I prayed prayers and God said yes, which happens sometimes, or I prayed prayers and God said no, which happens most of the time, to me anyway, that God is good.

[16 : 22] And His goodness sometimes comes in the form of a yes, and sometimes it comes in the form of a no, but it always means that His steadfast love is enduring forever.

And I feel like I just need to be reminded of that again and again and again. And so, what we're going to do is just take a few minutes together as a family to reflect on ways that God's goodness and His steadfast love have been made evident through Canaan Baptist Church, through all of the memories and all of the experiences that we've had here in this building, the relationships that have been built in this building, not just within our church, but between our church and Canaan.

For those of you who may have joined in for morning worship with our brothers and sisters in the Canaan Baptist community, for those friendships that will, God willing, continue for years and years and years, for connections that may have been made, for times when you felt like God may have particularly pressed something into your heart, ways that you may have grown in your faith, ways that you may have experienced a kind of spiritual breakthrough, if you've, you know, met best friends or spouses or this is where you were when you had your first kid, when you made a major life transition and you felt like God was in that change, this is a time to sort of collectively reflect on God's goodness and His love to us.

And we're going to invite you to do that silently, but also if you feel led, to do that aloud. And so, we're going to have a few minutes for us just to pray together. I'll open us, and then after a little while I'll close us and we'll transition to the next part of our worship.

But I invite you, if you feel led, just to stand, to speak loudly enough that everybody can hear and affirm and join in with you as you're praying, and just pray prayers of thanks for ways that God has worked through this space and this time that we've been meeting together since our church started over ten years ago.

[18 : 22] So, let's pray. The Lord be with you. Lord, we join together now and do what Your people have done since You have had a people from the very beginning, and that is to pause, to look back down the road that we have traversed, and to recognize Your fingerprints in our lives, to recognize those ebon azars, those stones of help, those places of intervention and provision, and to give thanks to You, Lord.

And so, we do that now for Your glory. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.

Thank you, Lord. Thank you.

Thank you.

[21 : 28] Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

[23 : 10] Thank you. Thank you. Mm. Mm. Mm. Mm.

Mm. Mm. Mm. Mm. Mm. Mm.

Mm. Mm. Mm. Mm. Mm. Mm.

Mm. Mm. Mm. Mm.

Mm. Mm. Mm. Mm. Mm. Mm.

[24 : 09] Mm. Mm. Mm. Mm. Mm. Mm. Mm.

Mm. Mm. Mm. New■san. The saying goes, we, we form the spaces that form us and we know that space is important and it matters and that there are ways in which the time that we've spent here that time has been formative for us, ways that you've used the, the wood and the concrete and the stained glass and the stone that that's become a part of our story and a part of of the DNA of our church, even more so the relationships, the friendships that were formed here that has shaped who we will be for generations. And it's a part of your story that's unfolding in this city. And we pray your blessing on Pastor Owens and on this community, the Canaan Baptist community. They have been generous. They have been open-hearted. They have taken a major step in renting to us after never having rented to a church before. And as they desire to open their doors to another community like ours that may need to rent space, we pray your blessing and provision for that relationship, that you would protect it and make it fruitful as you have made this relationship fruitful. And I agree with all of the people who have praised you for the ways that you've continually provided for our church and provided for our space needs. And Lord, we move forward fully trusting that you're going to continue to provide what we need. And knowing that you do that not because you have to, but because it's your delight to be good and to show your steadfast love and your provision to your children. And so, we as your children, Lord, as your family, give you thanks.

This place is a symbol of your provision. We give you thanks for all of the ministry that happened here. And Lord, we move forward trusting that there will be times down the road where we look back and only then begin to see the ways that you've provided for us as we move forward together, Lord. We thank you and praise you and pray all of this in your Son's holy name. Amen. Amen. Now we're going to join together and stand and respond to God's Word by singing.

Amen.