

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

God's Steadfast Love

John 3.16, Psalm 107

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Our readings this morning take us to the heart of the Gospel—what we believe about God and about Jesus and what it means to believe in him. And for that reason, and for good reason, it goes right to the first lessons many of us ever remember learning at church in Sunday School or at VBS or church camp.

The reading includes the verse that was the first verse many of us memorized. Scripture memory is a good thing and often neglected. But even those for whom Scripture memorization is neglected still often know this one by heart:

For God so loved the world he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life.

Many of us first met God with this verse on a poster on a wall over our teacher's head. It became for us the heart of the Gospel. God is love, we learned. God's love made known in Jesus who was God in the flesh, who lived and taught and showed people God's love of God for all kinds of people:

For religious scholars and fishermen.

For rich people and for poor people

For fat and thin

For young and old

For mommies and daddies and boys and girls

For fathers and mothers and those who have come before us and children and our children's children and all the yet unborn.

For my neighbor no matter who my neighbor is or how far away they live.

Even for enemies.

We learned all of this. God is love, and the shape of that love is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. You can spend a whole lifetime contemplating your place in God's inexhaustible love and never reach its depths or its heights. You could spend your life trying to be worthy of that love, and you won't go far enough. You could spend your whole life trying to love others, and you will not know the breadth.

God is love, and this means everything.

But even then, sometimes God is love falls on deaf ears.

The famous, outspoken atheist Christopher Hitchens was one of those. He said, "when Christians say God is love it's just white noise to me." (from Frederick Bauerschmidt, *The Love that is God*, 1).

White noise is the static drowning out the possibility of meaningful sounds.

When I think of white noise, I think of a staff retreat several years ago when one of our staff--who shall go unnamed but he knows who he is--claimed he couldn't sleep without his white noise machine. We all said, fine no problem, a little background white noise isn't so bad when you're sleeping in an unfamiliar place. What we didn't know was that white noise for him was the roar of a B52 engine rattling your teeth. That night he slept like a baby; I moved out to the garage.

For most people, white noise isn't such a roar. It's more like the sound of traffic on a distant highway. It's meaningless noise. It's empty calories, a distraction, a nothingness. The Bible word would be *hevel*--vanity of vanities, nothingness, woodsmoke, vapor rising into the air and dissipating into the ether. He said, "God is love is just white noise to me."

Hitchens may have a point. The love of God has been undermined by the unloving words and actions of Christians, sentimentalized by our reduction of love into warm fuzzies and empty tropes, and stigmatized by those who make it a slogan rather than the revolutionary source of all being.

In the ears of the world, "God is love" can sound like white noise. It can for Christians, too, when we lose sight of its meaning. We might believe it, but do we really know it? We might put it on a poster in our children's classrooms, but are we still in awe of it? Does it still make us walk the aisle or run to Jesus or cross oceans to share the Good News? Does it still make us fall on our knees or lay down our lives?

The Bible's vision of love is the sort that your life hangs on it; it matters. In our reading from Ephesians, God's love is called *great love*: "God, who is rich in mercy, out of the *great love* with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ--by grace you have been saved." God's great love is resurrecting, redeeming love, bringing to life what is dead, giving hope in despair, giving grace to the unworthy.

Those words are not empty words. They have power, the power to save our lives. And yet, so often we just say "God is love" often like we say obvious things that don't really matter: "The sky is blue." "Water is wet." "Daylight Savings Time is dumb." "God is love."

We may fall in the same trap with love. It just becomes an empty saying.

The Old Testament's favorite way of describing God's love may not inspire us any further: steadfast. God's steadfast love... Now, there's nothing wrong with something steadfast: unchanging, everlasting, sure and solid. But steadfast love is kind of like white noise. It's just in the background. It's just there and doesn't do anything much. Right? Are you sure about that?

Not in Psalm 107. In Psalm 107, steadfast love is not a generic, static of the universe. Steadfast love is that which is there when everything else is gone. It's what saves you when you have nothing left to hope for; it gives you courage for one more day when you don't think you can

continue on. Steadfast love is not static; it's what's still there when everything dynamic has blown up in your face.

Maybe we can't really know the depths and heights and breadth of God's love until we've been in that situation--until we've tasted fear or despair or discouragement and cried out in our trouble. But once you've been rescued from despair, steadfast love doesn't sound like static, it sounds like salvation.

Psalms 107 presents four kinds of people each of which are in their own kind of trouble. Each one begins, "Some people . . ." These descriptions are rooted in Israel's story, but the experiences ring true in lives in every generation. Four kinds of people, see if you recognize yourself or someone you love among them:

Some people are lost in the desert, and can find no way to a refuge. They hunger and thirst and their soul faints within them. Do you know that feeling? They are those who don't know what direction to head, and they can't find a way out of the boundless expanse of their wandering. Some people.

Some people are in darkness and the shadow of death; they are prisoners of affliction and of irons. They are burdened with heavy labor, but when they stumble and fall, there is no one to help. They are trapped. Do you know this feeling? It's like being in prison. Trapped by the bars of your past decisions, your circumstances, or the actions of other people. They can't see a way out. Some people.

Then, there are some people who are fools for what they have done to hurt themselves and others. They suffer the consequences of their own actions, but that doesn't make those consequences any easier to take. Do you know this feeling? They cannot even stomach food, which in scripture means not only the food, but the people food is shared with, the creatures from which food comes, and the God who provides it. They can't stand other people, themselves, the world around them, or barely God, and they can't see a way to pick themselves up off the floor.

Then there are some people who are confident in who they are and they strike out with a head full of self-assurance and a heart full of hope. They head out to sea in a big old ship to seek their fortune. Then the storm comes up. A big one. The wind blows and the waves churn. The boat is tossed to the sky and crashes down to the depths. Do you know this feeling? Life turns upside down. They stagger like drunkards; their courage is gone. They can't see how they can survive one more hit.

Four kinds of people. Four terrible experiences:
 Lost in the desert under the hot sun; all hope is gone.
 Alone in the dark in a prison; all light is gone.
 Disgusted with themselves and everything else; all belonging is gone.
 Fearful they can't weather the storm; all courage is gone.

Psalm 107. Four kinds of people. Four kinds of trouble. But then, something happens. From each kind of person in the depths of their trouble and despair comes a prayer, the same prayer in each of the four circumstances.

Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. (v.6)
 Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. (v.13)
 Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. (v.19)
 Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. (v.28)

This is love. God's steadfast love made known to desperately suffering people, all kinds of people.

The wilderness wanderer is led on a straight way; her hungering soul is nourished.

The imprisoned is brought out of darkness and the shadow of death. Doors and bars are broken. He is set free.

Fools receive God's word which heals them in every way a person can be healed. They are changed from rejecting God's goodness in creation to a heart overflowing with thanksgiving.

For the lost at sea, the storm is stilled, the winds are hushed, and they make it home alive. They come home with stories to tell of their deliverance.

What about you? What's your redemption story? What kind of beloved person are you? You are a beloved person. What kind of "Some People" are you? Are you like one of these kinds of people or do you have a slightly different chapter to write? To the story of God's redemption of people. Into every life comes trials and suffering. Cry to the Lord in your trouble. God loves you. God is love. God is coming to deliver. God's love is great, steadfast, sacrificial love.

And let us remember Christ who took on the world's suffering, pain, and sin. The cross of Christ points in four directions, pointing us toward the height and depth and breadth and reach of the love of God. When God loves all the world, God loves all in the world just where the world needs deliverance, renewal, redemption, salvation, hope, life.

So, we can with a full heart say indeed, God so loved the world he gave his only Son. In him, we believe; in him, we have life.

Thanks be to God.