

4 Advent Yr B, 20/12/2020
Ps 89:1-4, 19-26; 2 Sam 7:16; Lk 1:32-33
Pastor Garth Wehrfritz-Hanson

“God’s steadfast love and faithfulness”

Some Sundays, preachers scratch their heads and wonder how the biblical texts were chosen and how they connect or complement one another. Other Sundays, they are quite complementary and they definitely connect with one another—such is the case on this fourth Sunday in Advent. The 2 Samuel passage, Psalm 89, and today’s gospel all connect and complement one another. However, first let’s continue with focussing on today’s psalm.

My NRSV *Lutheran Study Bible* gives Psalm 89 the following title: “God’s Covenant with David.” It also includes this title: “A Maskil of Ethan the Ezrahite.” The Good News Bible has this title: “A Hymn in Time of National Trouble,” and, in a footnote it adds a Hebrew title: “A poem by Ethan the Ezrahite.”

The word Maskil, some scholars think, refers to a type of music, perhaps a musical tune that was played on instruments or sung by an individual or a choir. The word Ezrahite is found only two times in the entire Book of Psalms—our psalm and Psalm 88. Because the first one is followed immediately by the second one, scholars suggest that they may originally have been read, played or sung together. The word Ezrahite is perhaps associated with Ezra who was a priest active around the time of the people of Judah’s return from their Babylonian exile—in which case, Ethan, and Heman, who is named as the author of Psalm 88, may have been students or colleagues of Ezra. However that is not certain, since there are also references to Ethan and Heman as brothers

living around the time when Solomon was king, in which case these two psalms would have been written before the Babylonian exile.

In identifying what type of psalm this is, my *Lutheran Study Bible* (pp. 849-850) states that Psalm 89 is an individual prayer for help psalm, a hymn of praise psalm, and a royal psalm.

The psalm does begin as an individual hymn of praise with the words: "I will sing of your steadfast love, O LORD, forever; with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations." Those two words, "steadfast love," (*chesed*), and "faithfulness," (*amun*), are both "loaded words" and they show up together many times in the Book of Psalms. Steadfast love is also translated as lovingkindness, constant love, mercy, love, grace and gracious. Faithfulness is often associated with God's covenant, God's promises, God's loyalty. Both God's steadfast love and faithfulness can refer to God's saving actions, God's character and identity. The psalmist emphasizes the permanent presence of God's steadfast love and faithfulness—they are forever present, among all generations, as firm as the heavens. Moreover, these words, forever and all generations are also affirmed in relation to God's covenant with David and his dynasty.

Psalm 89, in referring to God's covenant with David and his line lasting forever, may be a commentary on our passage from 2 Samuel 7:16, where Nathan the prophet speaks these words to King David: "Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever."

As a royal psalm, the psalmist goes on to emphasize God choosing and blessing David as king. Notice the human-like qualities of God's activity toward David in verses 19-23: "I have set the crown..., I have exalted..., I have found..., I

have anointed him..., my hand shall always remain..., my arm also..., I will crush his foes..., and strike down those who hate him.”

Continuing with this theme of God choosing and blessing David as king; the psalmist goes on to say: “My faithfulness and steadfast love shall be with him; and in my name his horn—i.e. his power, his strength—shall be exalted.”

When King David, Israel’s ideal king, was anointed king and sat on his throne, he represented God’s royalty, God’s kingship on earth. All was well with the world because David ruled as king to ensure God’s steadfast love and faithfulness among God’s people. David’s power and influence to rule as king over God’s people were blessed only because of God’s steadfast love and faithfulness.

Of course, David’s dynasty did not last forever. The kings of Israel and Judah were far from perfect; they turned away from God for help; and their sinfulness, their vanity, their abuse of power, caused all kinds of suffering for God’s people; God withdrew his blessings from David’s line; and the portion of Psalm 89 that is left out of today’s lectionary turns from a hymn of praise into a prayer for help and a lament. The ending of the psalm expresses a sense of God abandoning the covenant with David and his dynasty. This psalm is the last one of Book III of the Psalter. It may end this way to emphasize that the people of God need to rely on the LORD as King rather than on an earthly king. The very last verse of the psalm may reflect a turning to God again, as it is in the form of a short doxology: “Blessed be the LORD forever,” and perhaps God’s people respond to the doxology with: “Amen and Amen,” meaning “Yes, let it be so!”

As Christians reading Nathan’s prophecy in 2 Samuel 7:16 and reading today’s psalm, we are reminded of a different kind of King from David’s line—namely, that of Jesus, who came to earth to fulfil what Nathan and the psalmist had

proclaimed, when Gabriel announced to Mary: “He (Jesus) will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

The humble birth of Jesus and his coming into the world as a human being to live among us, reminds me of the following story: A pastor whose last name was Law, lived in a town named Judgement. He wanted to be like Moses, and speak God’s Word to his parishioners from the church’s steeple, where he thought he was nearer to God. Pastor Law, when he climbed up to the steeple, thought he heard God speaking a message to him.

So, the pastor asked, “Where are you LORD? I can barely hear your voice.” The LORD replied, “I’m down here among my people.”

Jesus, like in this story, came down to be among us, he is our Immanuel-God with us, his people. That was and is, and ever shall be the message of his love, which we celebrate on this fourth Sunday of Advent. Love personified, true love, love that lasts forever, to all generations, that continues to reach out to you, me, and everyone in all the circumstances of life—including COVID-19. For that, thanks be to God! Amen and Amen!