

"The Faithfulness of God"
 (Psalm 89:1-4, 15-18 -- OR 19-25)
 © 2022 Rev. Dr. Brian E. Germano

[Cornerstone U.M.C.; 11-13-22]

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1. **[11am ONLY]** Read text: Psalm 89:1-4, 15-18
 (OR...Read Responsively UMH Psalter #807 - Psalm 89:1-4, 19-25) and Pray.

2. It was a hot, sultry, summer day in the year 79 A.D. The place was a bustling Roman city of 20,000 located on the Italian peninsula near present-day Naples -- a city that was typical of the prosperity and passion of the Roman culture of that day and time.
 But Pompeii was also located at the base of a then-dormant volcano called Vesuvius. And on that fateful day, Vesuvius erupted violently, spewing volcanic lava and ash throughout the countryside with such force and speed that most inhabitants of the city were caught off guard. Many were buried alive -- some in their cellars, trying to hide, while others were trapped on the upper floors of their homes. And for the next 1800 years, Pompeii lay entombed beneath the devastation of this now-infamous volcanic eruption.
 Yet, when archaeologists finally discovered the ruins of the city and began to unearth its remarkable treasures, among other things, they uncovered something amazing: a hollowed out spot near the city gate where a Roman soldier had been buried alive, still standing where he had been placed by his superiors nearly 2000 years before, still at attention, his hands still grasping his spear.
 Now, was the eruption of Vesuvius so fast and furious that this soldier didn't have time to react or get away? Maybe. But more than likely, he would have seen what was coming, & amidst the confusion & chaos that was all around him, instead of abandoning his post in fear or panic, he stood fast and remained faithful to his task to the very end. ¹

3. And to this very day, just as Mount Vesuvius has been remembered for its *inconstancy and unpredictableness*, this Roman sentinel has been forever remembered for his *constancy and faithfulness*.

4. You know, there's a lot of things in our world and in life which -- like Vesuvius -- are inconstant, unpredictable, out of our control, and in continuous change:
 A--Things like illness, pandemics, unemployment, recession, racism, violence, and death.
 B--And all these cause changes which are frustrating and uncomfortable: changes to our our bodies; changes with our families; changes to/with/in our communities.

C--For example, the recent pandemic left our world changed in many ways: in how we interact and socialize; how we experience eating out, sports events, the arts, and even how we worship and "do" church.

D--And like people of the past, amidst all the chaos, inconstancy, and unpredictableness of life, we, too, look for things -- like the Roman sentinel -- which are steadfast, unchanging, and faithful.

--II--

6. Well, today's scripture was written for just such a time and situation.

A--It comes from Psalm 89. [**9am ONLY...** Hear its words from Verses 1-4, 15-18:

"1 I will sing of the LORD's loyal love forever; I will proclaim your faithfulness with my own mouth from one generation to the next. 2 That's why I say, 'Your loyal love is rightly built—forever! You establish your faithfulness in heaven.' 3 You said, 'I made a covenant with my chosen one; I promised my servant David: 4 'I will establish your offspring forever; I will build up your throne from one generation to the next.'" Selah... *15 The people who know the celebratory shout are truly happy! They walk in the light of your presence, LORD! 16 They rejoice in your name all day long and are uplifted by your righteousness 17 because you are the splendor of their strength. By your favor you make us strong 18 because our shield is the LORD's own; our king belongs to the holy one of Israel!"*]

B--Now, while the people of Israel had, in the past, experienced God's blessing and prosperity through the leadership of their kings, Verses 38-48 (that we *didn't* read) indicate that something terrible had *recently* happened to cause people to question that goodness.

1--We don't know exactly what it was -- maybe it was a military defeat, famine, pestilence, another type of pandemic, or some other human or natural disaster.

2--But whatever it was, it was bad enough that people throughout the nation --just as many people do today -- were questioning the promises & presence of God.

C--So, Psalm 89 was written to give people *hope* by inviting them to them to reassert their faith and trust in the promises and faithfulness of GOD, even when *outward* circumstances seemed to suggest otherwise.

7. Verse 1 is actually the topic sentence for the entire Psalm, where it says: *"I will sing of the Lord's loyal/steadfast love ² forever. I will proclaim your faithfulness with my own mouth from one generation to the next."* ³

A--Then, in Verses 2-14, the author goes on to say that his trust and faith in God is based on God's covenant promises to the line of David, and how God's *past* faithfulness reminds him to trust God in the *present* crisis, as well. ⁴

B--As a result, in Verses 15-18 (or 19-25) he then invites the whole *community* to praise God and to affirm *their* loyalty to (& hope & trust in) GOD'S faithfulness, as well. ⁵

8. Now, I want us to notice something very important that's often missed in texts like this: at the end of Verse 4, there's a word [NOT found in the 11am Psalter reading] that appears in many places in the book of Psalms: the word "*SELAH*," which literally means "*Pause*." ⁶

A--And while most scholars think of this as instruction for the musicians who were singing/playing the Psalm (like a "rest" symbol in music today), there was a deeper meaning to it, as well,...

B--...Because in Hebrew, the word also means "*to reflect, contemplate, or think about*" what appears in front of it.

C--In this case, what appears in front of it (Verses 1-4) is the author's assertion that God can be trusted and that people can have hope in the *present* because of God's faithful in the *past*.

D--So, that little word "*selah*" at the end of those four verses means that we're supposed to pause... and think about the faithfulness of God in the *past* to give us hope for our own lives *today*.

--III--

9. You know, looking back, I realize that I can have hope in *my life* TODAY because I've been able to see God's constancy and faithfulness through times of challenge, change, and upheaval in my PAST:...

A--...When I had my heart broken many times while dating as a teenager and young adult, I remember that through it all, *God was faithful* and gave me hope.

B--...When my wife Trish nearly died from a serious illness after our daughter was born, I remember how *God was faithful* & walked with me through that time of uncertainty.

C--...When I experienced a personal crisis in the early 2000s that nearly cost me my family and ministry, *God was faithful* and didn't give up on me.

D--...When Trish was diagnosed and treated for breast cancer in 2006, *God was faithful* to both of us through her surgery, chemotherapy, radiation, and subsequent recovery.

E--...When our daughter announced she was pregnant out of wedlock while still in college, *God was faithful*, and enabled us to unconditionally love and support both her, our future son-in-law, and our first granddaughter-to-be.

F--And over the years (especially the past 2-3) when the harsh realities and challenges of church work have threatened to steal my joy and passion for ministry, *God has been faithful*, and continuously reminded me of His call on, and presence in, my life.

10. So I wonder: What would it look like for YOU to recall the *past* faithfulness of God in your *life* as a means of finding hope for whatever challenge you are facing in the *present*?

--IV--

11. You see, like Mount Vesuvius, we live in a world today where there are many things in life which are inconstant, unpredictable, & continuously in a state of change & transition.

A--And sometimes, the erratic eruptions of crises in life (like those of the last few years) can threaten to bury us alive in the fire and ash of their fury.

B--But as today's Psalm reminds us, like that Roman soldier in Pompeii, even *through* these, God's love and presence remain *constant* and *faithful*, always on watch for us,...

C--...so that even when we (or life) are faith-*LESS*, He/God is nevertheless faith-*FUL*.

12. So today, in the midst of whatever crisis you're facing, God is inviting you and I to "remember" His *past* faithfulness as a way of giving us hope for the *present* & the *future*!

13. [PRAYER]

14. [Suggested Closing Songs:

--(Contemporary) "*Do It Again*" (Elevation Worship, by George Veikoso & Michael Stevenson)

--(Traditional) UMH#140, "*Great Is Thy Faithfulness*"

ENDNOTES:

¹ Read about this story and a famous painting depicting it at <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/faithful-unto-death/UAEfV-4qLo6o7w>

² The term here is "*hesed*" (Strong's Hebrew Dictionary, word h2617), meaning literally "*kindness; by implication (towards God) piety: rarely (by opposition) reproof, or (subject.) beauty: favour, good deed(-liness, -ness), kindly, (loving-)kindness, merciful (kindness), mercy, pity.*"

³ The author is not being "pollyanna" here, inviting us to have some kind of "happy-go-lucky", unrealistic optimism when there is actually suffering and trouble all around. No. He's inviting us to reassert our trust and faith in God precisely *the midst of* crisis and trouble!

⁴ Regarding Verses 3-4, The New Interpreter's Study Bible Notes state that "*this promise to David came through the mouth of the prophet Nathan, according to 2 Sam 7. It was repeated for King Solomon (1 Chr 17:3-15) and is affirmed by prophetic words extending into the time of the Babylonian exile (cf. Isa 9:7; 55:1-5). One early victory song of David (Ps 18, found also as 2 Sam 22) vividly portrays Israel's convictions that God delighted in David and would forever bless and support his household.*"

⁵ Note: The "celebratory/festal shout" mentioned in Verse 15 was a communal affirmation of the king's authority and rule (i.e., an vocal affirmation of trust and hope in the kingship), and Verse 17's mention of the exalted "horn" is a metaphor for the king's strength and vigor -- again, an affirmation of trust and hope in the work of the king

And even though the latter part of the Psalm (Verses 38-48) does hint at some crisis that the people & monarchy are facing, the chapter doesn't *end* with these bad things. Instead, in Verses 49-51 the author intentionally turns God's promises into prayers, and in so doing, he's reminding the Hebrew people then (and I think us today) that the last word is *never* with the challenges and crises of life, but with the God who worthy to be trusted because of His faithfulness. In the words of one Bible scholar, commenting on Psalm 89: "*The question which the Psalm poses is this: what is to be done when the promises of God are denied by the face of experience? It answers: turn the promises into prayers and plead them before God.*" [Eerdman's Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdman's Publishing Co., 1989), Commentary on Psalm 89, p. 506].

⁶ "*selah*" (Strong's Hebrew Dictionary, word h5542), meaning literally to "*pause and reflect.*"