

## Advent II: Let Us Sing of the Goodness of God

### Psalm 85

A Season of Singing

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Sunday, December 4, 2005

Worship at 9 and 11 a.m.

Let us pray. Now let us hear, majestic God, creator of all things, the word that you speak to us in Jesus Christ. May this be a word of healing, a word of expectation, a word that changes us for good, for you are the good God who sent Jesus in the power of the spirit to bring salvation to us, in whose name we pray, Amen.

We continue in Advent recognizing that we are a people who walk in the night in anticipation that there is a wonderful day coming, that God in the past has done a wonderful thing by sending Jesus to us the first time to save us from evil and sin and, in the future, God will send Jesus again. As God has done in the past, God will do in the future. This is the essence of Psalm 85. It is an affirmation of the goodness of God, of how God has acted in the past (and remember that); it is a prayer for God to intervene today, that we need God's help today to live. It is an admittance that we do not behave well in the present, and we need to change our ways – to repent and do better – and it is an anticipation that God will again bring good things, good times, and a good pattern of life for people who pay attention and who love God with all their hearts.

A hymn in four verses, a symphony in four movements, this is the season of singing. We hear more singing, more songs about this time of year in anticipation of the coming of the Christ than in any other point during the year. In his book, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, C. S. Lewis said this about the Queen of Narnia, also called the Witch of Winter: "She made it always winter and never Christmas." Father Christmas shows up at a time when it seems as if there is a thaw in winter, and Father Christmas is the one who brings gifts to the people of God, to the children, and helps them to anticipate that there are better days coming. C. S. Lewis understood, particularly as he works through Narnia, that winter is a time when the symbol indicates that the spring has been put to death, but God will not allow that to be sustained. And so Father Christmas comes and gives good things in anticipation that there is the greatest gift to be given, and that is Aslan, the lion.

This week, I call your attention to the coming of the film, "The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe," and I encourage you to see it and to take a friend or family to see it. It's a film for all ages. It is a rendition of C. S. Lewis's book, which is one of the most popular books in the history of Christian literature. I also encourage you to take a copy of *Mere Christianity* and perhaps give it to a friend who is interested in what is being said in the film. If you have an interest in giving a copy to a friend, a free copy is available at the information desk after worship. Use this opportunity, this Advent, this event, to share the good news of Jesus Christ with a group of people who are open and interested in seeing what God does in a myth, in a mystery, in a magical way in film, for Jesus is portrayed clearly.

Aslan, according to C. S. Lewis in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, is not safe, but he is good. God is good. Jesus is good. God does not create evil; God does not send evil. God will bring good out of evil; God will turn evil into good. God will use evil for good. The only thing God can give is good gifts; evil comes from other sources. We continue to struggle with this basic theology today in our world. I still hear the question, "Well, if God is so good, then why is there evil in the world?" It is a foundational question about how good and evil coexist. What are the sources of the two? But scripture is very clear about this. God does not send evil. God can only send good. The scripture admits that evil exists, but that evil comes from the source of other spiritual forces, out of the dark side of our humanity. God is good. There is evil and trouble in the world – famine and war and AIDS, tsunamis and earthquakes, and malaria and bird flu exist – but God is good. God's intent is to bring goodness to bear on all of those tough things.

An outline of Psalm 85 is simply this: Remember that God has been good to us in the past. Take time to

list the goodness of God. Pray for God's goodness to be present in the here and now. Enter into a personal relationship with God, and expect that God will answer that prayer. Turn to God with a new sense of openness in life, and behave as God shows us how to live. If God is good, then those of us who relate to God should be good as well. The future, then, is that God will restore goodness to the world, and that people who accomplish goodness in the name of Jesus Christ will do what God wants to do with the future. God's goodness shines in four specific attributes in Psalm 85. The goodness shows through God's steadfast love. Goodness shows through God's faithfulness. Goodness shows through God's righteousness and justice, and goodness shows through God's peace. The Lord will only give these good gifts if the people of God will turn to him in prayer.

This is a judgment against our human ability to do the right thing. We cannot do the right thing without the living God being in our midst, and being in relationship with the living God. We can try hard; we can make good plans, and we can work for the purpose of bringing peace into the world, but without God and Jesus Christ in the midst of our planning and prayer, it will not be good. These four attributes of a good God come because God is present and active among his people. The first of these attributes is hesed, which is that attribute that is called steadfast love. Steadfast love is an absolute commitment. It is a covenant. God has committed himself, in Jesus Christ, to love us no matter what. It is a promise and a vow that God will never deny. Steadfast love means that God is with you no matter what or, as Romans 8 says: "Nothing can separate you from the love of God." Absolutely nothing. Hesed – God's love is steadfast, immovable, irrevocable.

One of the great Christmas carols that reflects on this contains these words: "Of the Father's love begotten, ere the world began to be, he is Alpha and Omega, he the source and ending he. All the things that are and have been and the future years shall see, evermore and evermore." As God has given us love in the past through Jesus Christ, God will continue, forever, to do so. "Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming" also reflects on the love of God: "Isaiah 'twas foretold it, that the rose I have in mind. With Mary we behold it, the virgin mother kind. To show God's love aright she bore to us a savior when half spent was the night." This is an example of irrevocable love that we sing of during Advent and Christmas.

The second attribute of this love is called in Hebrew 'emet: faithfulness. God is trustworthy. You can depend upon God. God is a keeper of the promise that God has made from the beginning. When God promises to save Israel, God will keep that promise. When God promises to save us through Jesus Christ, he will keep that promise. Steven Covey, in his reflections on leadership during a major leadership event not too many years ago, said that the major issue of leadership today is the loss of trustworthiness. Leaders cannot be trusted any more. So his appeal to leaders across all forms of institutional life is to become a person who can be trusted. And I am here to say that the only way that can happen is for us to be intimately connected to a God who is ultimately trustworthy.

The Advent carol, "Of the Father's Love Begotten," reflects on that trustworthiness. "This is he whom seer and sibyl sang in ages long gone by, this is he of old revealed in the page of prophecy. Lo he comes, the promised savior, let the world send back his cry, evermore and evermore." God will keep promises. Jesus has come, and Jesus will come again. Jesus is here today.

The third attribute of God's goodness is that Old Testament word, sedeq: righteousness and justice. God's very character is in righteousness and justice. God will only do the right thing, and God will turn all the wrong things to right. "Come thou long expected Jesus, born to set thy people free," for there is something wrong; your people are not free. "Hail the heaven born Prince of Peace, hail the Son of Righteousness." May the day of righteousness rise upon upon us, because we know that the world is full of unrighteousness. "He rules the world with truth and grace and makes the nations prove the glories of his righteousness and the wonders of his love." Christmas carols are full of a cry of God's righteousness, because the world is without it. In C. S. Lewis's book, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, he describes the country of Narnia and its sense of utter desolation during the unremitting cold of winter. He makes the observation that when Aslan, the lion, finally comes, he will make things right, and this song will be sung: "Wrong will be right when Aslan comes in sight. At the sound of his roar, sorrows will be no more. When he bares his teeth, winter meets its death, and when he shakes his mane, we shall have spring again." Aslan will make things right. Aslan will bring righteousness and justice.

The fourth attribute is shalom, the word peace, which is better translated as “the fullness of being.” You will have it all, and you will be at rest in the fact that you have it all because God is perfect peace and has it all; wholeness and completeness. And in this word shalom there is a sense of being at home with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, a sense of sanctuary that God creates a place for us. There is security. “O come thou key of David, come, and open wide our heavenly home. Make safe the way that leads on high, and close the path to misery. O come desire of nations, bind all peoples in one heart and mind, bid Thou our sad divisions cease, and be thyself our King of Peace.” Peace eliminates the divisions between human beings. If we have issues with one another, peace from God begins to heal those divisions and breaks down those walls. “Hark, the herald angels sing, glory to the newborn king. Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled.” Thus are human beings reconciled with each other.

We have an opportunity in this Alternative Gifts Market to bring good gifts of peace and justice and reconciliation...to help people who have been flooded by tsunami and by hurricanes...to help people who have been overcome by earthquakes and are freezing to death because they do not have homes...to feed the hungry...to minister to the homeless...to provide gifts for people who are suffering from mental illness and from physical illness...to provide humanitarian relief, and to share the gospel in the midst of all of these things so that people know that the good that is being done is in the name of Jesus the Christ.

I sat with a group of pastors this past week from all over Washington, DC. Most of them were African American pastors. They were meeting here at National Presbyterian Church, and they invited me to come and join them! (Now that's ironic, isn't it?) They were so glad I was there because their experience of Washington, DC is that we white people just don't care. And they embraced me. They came out of their seats and they hugged me. They said, “We're so glad that you're here. Maybe there's a new day coming when we will be reconciled between the southeast and the northwest.” Maybe there's a time when the mayor of Washington, DC will know that we are a church in the northwest. I met the mayor not too long ago, and he asked me: “Where is your church?” I said, “It's the National Presbyterian Church.” He said, “I know that your are involved with the National Presbyterian Church, but where is your local church?” I said, “Mayor, please. There is a church called ‘The National Presbyterian Church’ up on Nebraska Avenue in northwest Washington, DC.” And he said, “Really?” He was serious.

There is a hunger in Washington, DC for the peace and reconciliation of brothers and sisters in Christ to come together, and I hope and pray that we can participate in that because there is a great hunger for it. So pray that we will be able to deconstruct some old habits and reconstruct some new habits, because God is a God of peace and reconciliation. C. S. Lewis, in his book, *Mere Christianity*, talks about how good it is being brought into the world. He uses the example of an infection. “Good things as well as well as bad are caught by a kind of infection,” C. S. Lewis says. Once a person is united to God, how could he not live forever. Once a person is separated from God, how could she not but wither and die. Have you caught the infection? Have you been connected to a God who is good so that goodness literally rubs off on you? C. S. Lewis's commitment is that there cannot be a distribution of the infection without personal contact. So if God is love, God is righteousness, God is faithful for us to become those kinds of things. We have to become infected with the living God in Jesus Christ.

Jesus came into the world to spread the good infection, to show us that there is no greater love than to lay down your life for your friends or your enemies, and today we share that experience again in remembrance of the Lord's Supper, which is a recognition that Jesus gave us his body and his blood, and he spread the infection. We take it into our bodies and we become people who are empowered by the spirit in Jesus' name. The psalm ends with a wonderful relational style and metaphor. Steadfast love meets righteousness face to face. Faithfulness kisses peace. Faithfulness springs up from the earth, and righteousness looks down from heaven. This is a wonderful image of the relationship in reconciliation in a horizontal way, and the relationship and reconciliation in a vertical way-- the cross of Jesus. The focus of the cross where everything converges is that Jesus is the one who reconciled human beings to God and to one another.

We celebrate that goodness today that becomes like an infection that spreads among us and ripples out to other people because God is good, and the people of God become good. Let us pray:

O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray. Cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today. We

hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell, O come to us abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel.

Amen.