

Whose Church Is It, Anyway?

Psalm 89:20-37

Jessica Means

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It is hard to believe that this will be my last official Sunday with y'all as the summer intern. At least for me, these past 8 weeks have flown by. It has been such a joy to be welcomed into this congregation, to worship and minister with you. In these eight weeks, as we have gotten to know each other and engaged in conversations about the church and the community, y'all have been gracious enough to share with me some of your hopes and your concerns for the church, both Lakewood Presbyterian and the church at large. One thing I have consistently heard is that the church has been a gift to you. It is a place where you have been welcomed and nurtured, where you have received help in times of trouble, where you have been sustained by the love of Christ in community, and you want to share that with others. You dream of an intergenerational church, where Christ's love and call to service is being shared and lived in a growing and vibrant community. On the other hand, you are worried about what the church will look like 10 or 20 or 50 years from now. Will there still be young people? Will current trends of church decline continue? How will the church be relevant? Will anyone show up to these buildings that have meant so much to us?

Lakewood is not alone in these dreams and concerns, especially the concerns. I am sure most of you are already familiar with at least the general highlights of church membership and attendance trends in America. A Gallup poll released in March showed that, for the first time since Gallup started measuring this in 1937, church membership amongst all US adults had fallen below 50%, and for millennials (who are about 25-40 years old now), membership is around 36%. The decline is seen across just about every demographic group, and the rate of decline appears to be accelerating. And that is just one study of many we could point to documenting such trends, both within the Presbyterian Church and in the American church at large. Much ink has been spilled about why people are no longer joining churches, whether the trend is reversible, and what we should do about it.

It would be easy to hear all that and feel ready to throw in the towel. Responses to this trend seem to range from panic that it's all going down the drain to a rallying of the troops to try to save the church. But I don't actually want to talk about all the reasons we should be worried about the church today or outline my three step plan to fix it. Instead, I'd rather talk about why we have great hope for the church. Because I can promise you this: the church will not be dying. God's people will thrive.

The future of God's people has appeared to hang in the balance before. In fact, you could probably read the Old Testament as the story of God's people on the brink, and God pulling them back. Our Scripture for today, Psalm 89:20-37, points to just such a time in the life of Israel, who our tradition confesses to be the first gathered people of God, the first church. Listen for the word of the Lord.

I have found my servant David;
with my holy oil I have anointed him;
²¹ my hand shall always remain with him;
my arm also shall strengthen him.
²² The enemy shall not outwit him,
the wicked shall not humble him.
²³ I will crush his foes before him
and strike down those who hate him.
²⁴ My faithfulness and steadfast love shall be with him;
and in my name his horn shall be exalted.
²⁵ I will set his hand on the sea
and his right hand on the rivers.
²⁶ He shall cry to me, 'You are my Father,
my God, and the Rock of my salvation!'
²⁷ I will make him the firstborn,
the highest of the kings of the earth.
²⁸ Forever I will keep my steadfast love for him,
and my covenant with him will stand firm.
²⁹ I will establish his line forever,
and his throne as long as the heavens endure.
³⁰ If his children forsake my law
and do not walk according to my ordinances,
³¹ if they violate my statutes
and do not keep my commandments,
³² then I will punish their transgression with the rod
and their iniquity with scourges;
³³ but I will not remove from him my steadfast love,
or be false to my faithfulness.
³⁴ I will not violate my covenant,
or alter the word that went forth from my lips.
³⁵ Once and for all I have sworn by my holiness;
I will not lie to David.
³⁶ His line shall continue forever,
and his throne endure before me like the sun.
³⁷ It shall be established forever like the moon,
an enduring witness in the skies."

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Like most of the Psalms, we do not know exactly who wrote Psalm 89 or when. However, when we read the Psalm in its entirety, rather than just this middle excerpt we have today, it's clear that Psalm was written in a time of distress for Israel, when their future as a distinct people was at stake. Most scholars believe it was written around the time that

Babylon was conquering Israel, which happened in several stages over many years. Israel knew themselves to be the people of God. What would happen to them if they were subsumed into the empire of Babylon?

The Psalm begins with lengthy praise of God. It calls back to mind God's character and God's past faithfulness to Israel. It specifically mentions God's covenant with King David, in which God promised to establish David's descendants as rulers of Israel forever. Obviously, Babylon's conquest puts this promise into question. By the end of the Psalm, the psalmist is lamenting and wondering if God will really be faithful to that promise, particularly if the people have been unfaithful to their end of the covenant. But the middle verses, the part we just read, remind us exactly who God is and what God has promised to God's people. We see words like always, forever, and once and for all as an indication that God is serious about the establishment of the people of God under the reign of the descendants of David.

What we are most reminded of over and over again in this passage is the faithful and steadfast love of God. In fact, it speaks of God's steadfast loving kindness, three times, and God's faithfulness four times. We hear it over and over again: "My faithfulness will be with him." "Forever I will keep my steadfast love for him." "I will not remove from him my steadfast love or be false to my faithfulness." The repetition here in this Psalm is reflective of a theme of the entire Old Testament. In fact, it echoes one of the most important self-descriptors God uses in the Bible. In the Exodus story, Moses takes two stone tablets up Mt. Sinai and God promises to meet Moses there and inscribe the law on the tablets. Then the Lord descends upon the mountain and proclaims this to Moses:

The Lord, the Lord,
a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,
7 keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation

For the people of Israel, this becomes a key marker of God's identity: abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation. Throughout the Old Testament, we see God's people relying on this truth about God. The prophets in particular seem to know this to be true. For example, when Jonah refuses to go to Nineveh to preach repentance, it's because he knows that God is slow to anger and abounding in love, and so God will forgive the Ninevites if they repent. Jonah doesn't want God to do that, so he runs the other way. Basically, if there is one thing you can take to the bank about God's character, it is this: God is full of steadfast love and faithfulness.

Psalm 89 points us to an additional truth about God's faithfulness – it is not dependent on us. God's promises are sure, whether or not we ever live up to our end of the bargain. In speaking of the covenant with David, God says this:

If his children forsake my law
and do not walk according to my ordinances,
³¹ if they violate my statutes
and do not keep my commandments,
³² then I will punish their transgression with the rod
and their iniquity with scourges;
³³ but I will not remove from him my steadfast love,
or be false to my faithfulness.
³⁴ I will not violate my covenant,
or alter the word that went forth from my lips.
³⁵ Once and for all I have sworn by my holiness;
I will not lie to David.

St. Augustine, in his commentary on the Psalms, paraphrases God in these verses this way: “Because his sons sin, I will not on this account be found false: I have promised; I will do.” What an assurance we have from God: I have promised, I will do.

That promise from God is just as sure for God’s people today as it was for Abraham, for Moses, for David, for St. Augustine, and for everyone in between. And this is why I have great hope for the church. In Psalm 89, we are reminded that God made a promise to David: there would always be some group that is God’s people, and they would be under the reign of David’s line. We know that second part of the promise to be fulfilled in Jesus Christ who reigns as the anointed king over God’s kingdom, and who the Gospels trace back to the family of David. And so, we can trust the first part of the promise as well. God will always preserve God’s people. Though they may shrink, though they may change, though they may be challenged at every turn, God will always preserve a remnant. The church will go forth.

Jesus, in fact, reminds us of this very truth when he anoints Simon as Peter, saying, “on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.” The church will not fall. It will not die. Nothing, not even the very gates of hell itself, can stand in the face of God’s faithfulness and loving kindness to God’s people.

Now, it is true that God does not promise the form of the church. The lament that finishes Psalm 89 reminds us that God does not always show up or work in the ways we expect. God is faithful to God’s promise, but we have to leave room for God to be faithful in God’s own way. This remains true for those of us who love the church. God will preserve the church – God always preserves a remnant. But it is God’s church, and not ours, so we need to be prepared for the fact that the church may not look like we expect it to, like we are familiar with. We can see this in the evidence of the growth of Christianity today. We make much of the fact that Christianity appears to be trailing off in the US and Europe. But did you know that it is actually still growing globally? Even as Christianity in the western world appears to decline, it is flourishing in South America, Africa, and Asia. Even within our own context, we see signs of life outside of what we think of as the traditional

church. Much has been made of the nones and dones, but many of those folks, especially in the “dones” category, are simply finding different ways to express their spiritual connection to God and their place amongst God’s people. They may no longer be gathering in church buildings, but they are gathering, creating, and flourishing. Church is flourishing in the US in new forms – dinner churches and farm churches and bar churches. God’s people are gathering in ways and places we do not always recognize. Do we have eyes to see it?

One of my favorite images of God’s preservation of God’s people is from Coventry Cathedral in England. If you flip to the cover of your bulletin, you can see a picture of it. If you look closely, you will notice that the right half of the church is a fairly modern building, but the left half is a ruin of a much older church. The medieval church, along with the city of Coventry, was destroyed by incendiary bombs in a German air raid in 1940. The next day, the cathedral staff made a decision to preserve the ruins and build a new adjacent cathedral as a sign of faith, trust, and hope for the future. The cathedral has since become a center for peace and reconciliation, a ministry of healing and forgiveness in the wake of World War II. The leaders of Coventry knew one thing to be true: God is faithful to God’s people. God preserves the church. They have provided us a powerful depiction of the flourishing of God’s people rising from the remnants.

Friends, let us then take heart. We who love the church, we who are privileged to be counted amongst God’s people, we have great hope. God is faithful and steadfast. God has founded the church on the cornerstone of Jesus Christ, the church sits under Christ’s reign, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against her. God has promised, and God will do. Thanks be to God.