

Easter Vigil, Gospel Year A

God Remains Faithful

Psalm 118:1-2, [5-13], 14-24, [25-29]

Easter Vigil

Analysis by Nathan Hall

*1 O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his steadfast love endures forever!*

*2 Let Israel say,
"His steadfast love endures forever."*

*3 Let the house of Aaron say,
"His steadfast love endures forever."*

*4 Let those who fear the Lord say,
"His steadfast love endures forever."*

...

*14 The Lord is my strength and my might;
he has become my salvation.*

*15 There are glad songs of victory in the tents of the
righteous:*

*"The right hand of the Lord does valiantly;
16 the right hand of the Lord is exalted;
the right hand of the Lord does valiantly."*

*17 I shall not die, but I shall live,
and recount the deeds of the Lord.*

*18 The Lord has punished me severely,
but he did not give me over to death.*

*19 Open to me the gates of righteousness,
that I may enter through them
and give thanks to the Lord.*

*20 This is the gate of the Lord;
the righteous shall enter through it.*

*21 I thank you that you have answered me
and have become my salvation.*

*22 The stone that the builders rejected
has become the chief cornerstone.*

23 *This is the Lord's doing;
it is marvelous in our eyes.*
24 *This is the day that the Lord has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.*
[25 *Save us, we beseech you, O LORD!
O LORD, we beseech you, give us success!*
26 *Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD.
We bless you from the house of the LORD.*
27 *The LORD is God,
and he has given us light.*
*Bind the festal procession with branches,
up to the horns of the altar.*
28 *You are my God, and I will give thanks to you;
you are my God, I will extol you.*
29 *O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever.]*

Definition: Acclamations of the LORD's steadfast love (אֱמוּנָה) bookend this psalm. However steadfast love does not cover the fullness of אֱמוּנָה. This word more basically means loyalty, often in a covenantal relationship. It is the bond that develops as a result of this relationship. So אֱמוּנָה happens in marriages. It happens amongst friends. It is the joint obligation, the faithfulness to this obligation, and the steadfast love that is shown in the committed relationship.

Author's Note: In this time of the coronavirus it seems to me that it is a good idea not to divide the psalm as the lectionary suggests. I have reinserted the second of the excised portions, but noted where this excision was. Until just before the end the psalm details the victory that the psalmist has received from the LORD. The final section changes from recounting a past victory to voicing a present plea. Such pleas cannot be left out of talk about the Lord's steadfast love (אֱמוּנָה) especially when we ourselves are on our knees begging for God's help as we face the coronavirus.



DIAGNOSIS: Divided Loyalties

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Loyalty (Lite)

These days are lived under the threat of the novel coronavirus. Indications are that this virus is highly transmissible and deadly. Those of us with any sense of civic responsibility are huddled in our houses, only going out for necessities. Of course, civic responsibility only goes so far, as evidenced by toilet paper hoarding, opportunists hawking hand-sanitizer for exorbitant prices, the infamous spring-breakers who continue to congregate amongst Florida's elderly population, and the contagion-carrying flight of people from infected cities to the countryside.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): Competing Loyalties

There is plenty of fear to go around. There is fear for those who are vulnerable, especially loved ones. What person does not have several dear ones whose names are constantly lifted in her prayer. While civic-minded duty and loyalty (□□□□□) to each other may be one of the motivating factors keeping us out of the public sphere, there are indications that other factors are at play. Fearful self-interest and self-preservation seem equally present. People are not simply concerned for others, or even their vulnerable loved ones. People are worried for themselves. They are worried that this virus may harm or kill. They are worried about the economic impact on business. They are worried that the world we have known is at a pivotal moment, never again to return to itself. These two loves, love of self and love of others, create their own fears. Love creates a fear of loss and, when there are two fears in competition, one loses. To whom do we owe our loyalty (□□□□□)? How can we even be loyal to anything when we are so alone?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Debt of Loyalty

Of course, there is one to whom we owe □□□□□; this is of course God. However, preoccupied by fear, we may have forgotten that this is so. We rightly are concerned about the loss of good things, both for neighbor and self. But what does our obligation towards God look like in the days of COVID-19? What does it mean to be loyal, faithful, loving? Martin Luther suggests in the Small Catechism that the thing we fear, love, and trust above all else is the thing that acts as our God. When our other hopes sit in the highest seat, and the threat of a virus rises to unseat them, God may well not stand in the way. Our grief and loss, which at the time I type this is yet anticipated, is soon to hit, and hit hard. We might join the psalmist in a cry “Save us, we beseech you, O LORD!” But the rest is up to God.

PROGNOSIS: True Loyalty

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): The Loyal One



hands holding the sun at dawn

We are trained to think that `□□□□` (loyalty, faithfulness, love, etc.) is a two-way street. Yet the Bible assures us this is not so: “if we are faithless, he remains faithful” (2 Tim. 2:13). When our fears reveal that our disordered loves are idolatrous, even then God shows deep compassion. God sends Jesus into our fearful isolation. God in Christ takes our fearful idolatry and willingly joins himself to the death for which it is destined. God has done this to rescue us. In place of death and abandonment which is crucified with Christ, we encounter a loyalty and love that reclaims us over and over again. “O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.”

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Joined to the Loyal One

Perhaps we are still fearful. We do not know exactly what the future will bring. But the taste we have had of God's `□□□□`, is a taste of grace that lingers. We trust that God will never abandon us. We may grieve, but it is not as those who have no hope. God's grace gives us freedom to love even when we are fearful, because we know that Jesus redeems the world. Because we have experienced God's salvation in Jesus, we are encouraged to entrust the future to God, even if we do not know what the future will be.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Loyal to Neighbor

We stay home unless our vocation dictates otherwise. We support those who need support. We keep tabs on our at-risk neighbors. We carry food to those who should avoid stores. We share with those who are in financial jeopardy. We seek out conversations with the anxious. We pray together. Out of God's loyalty to us we are drawn to be loyal to each other.