

A Month of UN-Sundays: Unchanging

August 16, 2020

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Psalm 102:1-12, 25-28

Today we are continuing our way through a series of sermons titled “A Month of Un-Sundays,” where we are looking at God’s responses to the “UNs” that we are facing right now, here, in this particular space and time that we find ourselves in. In the face of our uncertainty, our need to unschedule and undo and untether ourselves from hopes and dreams that we may have had for this year; as we have had to let go of so much in the last five months it has become easy for us to fixate on our challenges and our losses, and to forget some key pieces about who God is – the UNs of God’s work in our life. God is unrelenting, for example. God never stops seeking us out and drawing us closer to him – no matter what life circumstance we are facing. God is unfailing. The work that God starts, God finishes. And in the words of the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippians, God has begun a good work in us that he will bring to completion.

And today we are looking at a third UN. And this is a really interesting characteristic that, depending on your personality type, could be looked at as a really comforting thing, or could be seen as a frustrating thing. But today in our Psalm we see that God is not only unrelenting and unfailing, but God is also unchanging.

Or maybe a better way to put that, is that God is trustworthy. God is forever. God is enduring. God is steady, and constant.

Today’s Psalm is another Psalm that has a story underneath it. Last week, when we read Psalm 51, we were reminded of the story of King David and the brokenness that led to this deep prayer of repentance. Like Psalm 51, today’s Psalm is another Psalm of Lament. A Psalm of sadness – a Psalm where the person praying is calling – crying – out to God for help, for comfort, for support. Unlike Psalm 51, we don’t know exactly who wrote this one, or exactly why. In verse 13 we get a little clue, where the Psalmist is trying to tell God that the time is right to restore Zion, which leads us to believe that probably this was one of the many Psalms that was written during the time of the Exile.

If you will remember your Old Testament history, after King Solomon died, Israel started to circle the drain, so to speak. Solomon was a wise king and a faithful ruler, but the same could not be said for his sons. It wasn’t long before Israel launched into an all-out Civil War, which left the once-great kingdom divided into two separate kingdoms, the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. Both of these kingdoms – Israel and Judah – saw their fair share of ups and downs for many years, but in the end the sinfulness and the all-out rebellion of both kingdoms and their rulers got the better of them and God allowed them to be conquered by bigger, stronger kingdoms. Israel

was invaded by the kingdom of Assyria in 732 BC, and the people were scattered throughout the north, never to be seen or heard from again. We think that ultimately, their descendants became the Samaritans, who we see hundreds of years later in the gospels, as the people who the Jews absolutely could not stand.

And then, later, around the year 597 BC the southern kingdom of Judah was invaded and conquered by the Babylonian Empire, and the vast majority of the people were forcibly marched across the desert and into the city of Babylon, while their homes and their beloved Temple (the same temple that we talked about last week) were looted, burned, and destroyed.

After about 50 or 60 years, Babylon was conquered by the Persian Empire, and under the rule of King Cyrus of Persia, all of the exiles were allowed to return home to what had once been the kingdom of Judah, and begin the process of rebuilding – a process that would prove itself to be challenging and discouraging.

But in the meantime, there were about 5, maybe 6 decades there when the people of Judah are stuck in a scary and sometimes hostile foreign land, speaking a language that is not their own, trying to make sense of customs that are not their own, and sometimes enduring intense persecution for practicing their faith. The story of Daniel being thrown into the lion's den, and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego being tossed into the fiery furnace were both written during this time. The Israelites were scared, and they were angry, and they were grieving, and they were confused. They didn't know if they would ever be allowed to return home again, except that the prophets had all spoken of a time when God would restore his people, so they were constantly waiting for that day to come, living on the edge of their seats, longing for God to pour out judgment upon Babylon and make everything right again.

So all of that is what's happening behind the scenes of Psalm 102. This Psalm begins as a plea for help. A deep, heart-felt lament.

"Hear my prayer, O Lord;
let my cry come to you."

And then the Psalmist uses a series of metaphors to express exactly how he is feeling:

"My bones burn like a furnace."
"My heart is stricken and withered like grass."
"I am too wasted to even eat my bread."

So we immediately get the strong sense that the Psalmist is sick. He's in physical pain. He is too weak even to eat. That actually happened to quite a few Israelites in exile – the food was different from what they were used to and they were exposed to a wide number of diseases that they did not have immunity to, so many of them got sick and died.

He can't sleep. He can't stop groaning, or crying out in pain. He's in a bad place. He doesn't know whether he is going to live or die, and there is a part of him that just wants to throw in the towel and die. It would be one thing if he were just living in exile. But exile plus sickness, that is one too many things to handle, and he is not sure he can do it much longer. So he does the only thing he knows to do: He cries out to God for help.

And then, this Psalm makes a turn. In verse 12 the focus shifts from the Psalmist's pain, his suffering, his plea to God, to the hope the Psalmist has that God – the God of all time and eternity – will restore Israel. Will bring the whole country out of this mess – and perhaps, him along with them. His hope lies in the knowledge that God has promised better days ahead. And if there is one thing that he knows about God, it is that God can be trusted. That God keeps his promises. The God who created the earth's foundations and hung the lights in the sky – this is the same God who was there with him, now. The God who gave the law to Moses so many hundreds of years ago, is the same God who is now bringing judgment upon the people for breaking that law. God's love, God's creativity, God's expectations, God's faithfulness, God's hopes and dreams for his people – none of that has changed, not even one little bit. God's care and compassion. God's longings and his deepest desires. God's sorrow and grief over the brokenness of his people – all of that has remained the same as well.

And because God is unchanging; because God remains the same for all eternity; because God is forever and God's love is enduring, that gives the Psalmist hope, that this pain that he is facing, this uncertainty that Israel is living through, this frustrating and disappointing life that he is living, is not all that there is. There is life beyond the present pain because, in God, there is *always* life on the other side. There is hope for life beyond the now, because that's how God created life to be.

And because God is unchanging, here we sit, now, more than 2500 years later, praying to this very same God. So much about life has changed between the exile and today. Electricity. The printing press. Cars. Computers. Medicine. We've pretty much explored and discovered the whole world since then. We've put people into space. In an instant, we can be connected with people on the other side of the globe. Through a little device that we can hold in the palm of our hand. If our kids need new clothes for school, we don't have to go out and shear the sheep to spin the wool to weave the fabric to sew into a garment. We just drive to the store, pick from a huge, colorful array of options, and drive home again. Or, if we don't feel like going out, we just order it on Amazon and, assuming it's not shipping from China, it will be here in two days.

This week I was having some pain in one of my teeth, and when I went into the dentist, within about 10 minutes he had my mouth numbed and he was inside the tooth cleaning out the infection. 2500 years ago, a toothache could have easily led to an

infection, sepsis, and death. Today, all it takes is maybe one or two dentist visits and a round of antibiotics to have us back to work again.

The world has changed. *We* have changed. Our priorities; our ways of communicating with one another; our traditions and customs; our laws. Between then and now, Jesus happened. The New Testament was written. The church was born. Gamechangers, for us.

But through all of the changes that we have seen as human beings over the course of time, one thing has *never* changed, not even for a minute. And that is God. God *has*, at times, related to us a little bit differently, speaking to us in ways that we can understand, waiting until the time is right to reveal himself to us. Our experience of God in the person of Jesus may have been different than Moses' experience of God in the burning bush, or David's experience of God when the prophet Nathan was confronting him, or the Israelites' experience of God when they were living in exile. And all that may look different from the ways that we pray to God now, and connect with God today. But God *himself*, the nature of who God is, that is the same as it has always been.

Today, we might hear God's words through a smartphone app and 2500 years ago the people had to rely on the preaching of the prophets to hear the voice of God. Today we hear those words in 21st Century English and during the exile the people were hearing some mix of ancient Hebrew and various Babylonian languages. But despite the differences, the message to us is the same. That God created us. God loves us. God weeps over us when we turn away from God. God redeems us. And God is always, always, always at work drawing us closer to the heart of God. That has been the message since the very beginning. That was the message when Adam and Eve were kicked out of the garden. That was the message when the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness. That was the message during the exile. That was the message that Jesus went to the cross to help us see. That was the message that the apostle Paul wrote about. And that has been the message that the church has proclaimed – sometimes more faithfully than others – for 2000 years.

And that is the message that you and I need more than anything else today. Because right now, we are sort-of walking through our own little mini-Exile. God-willing this exile won't last for 50 years like it did for the Israelites. Just 5 months in and we are already starting to unravel. But still. When things are changing at warp speed. Do this. No, do this. Here's the recommendation. Oh! Whoops! Now we have new information and the recommendation has changed. We're open. We're closed. We're partially-open. We don't know if we are open or not. Then throw in some politics during an election year, and then a combination of Google and social media – which pretty much makes everybody feel like an instant expert on everything, and all of a sudden we don't know which direction is up, and which direction is down anymore.

In all of the change that is surrounding us, that is defining our lives right now; as confusing and disorienting as all of it has been and continues to be; thank God that we have one constant. One steady. We have a God who is standing here rock solid, never – not even for an instant – swayed by the storms of life that are threatening our lives and livelihoods. A God who is unchanging. A God who is immovable. A God who is unshakable. A God who has always been – and still to this day remains – our Creator. A God who has always and forever reached into our lives with an amazing love and powerful grace. A God who has seen his people through monumental challenges for millennia, and who always manages to show us that there is life on the other side of the grave.

So today may we join together with the Psalmist and take heart, knowing that no matter the twists and turns that life takes, the love of God; the power of God; the grace of God; and the presence of God will never fade, will never change, and will always be our solid rock and our sure foundation.