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# ENDURING LOVE

PSALM 136

A SERMON PREACHED IN DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL  
ON SUNDAY, AUGUST 9, 2020 BY THE REV. BRUCE PUCKETT

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Breathe with me. Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe. It's necessary for life. When functioning properly, our body so effortlessly performs this essential regular rhythm of inhaling and exhaling, breathing, often without our being conscious of it. Every inhale is an inspiration, a filling of our body with life, and every exhale is an expiration, sending that life back out of ourselves. We live in a constant rhythm of inspiration and expiration, inhaling and exhaling, breathing in and breathing out. If we ever stop this pattern, voluntarily or involuntarily, life ceases.

The air that fills our lungs when we take a breath becomes the baseline of life. It becomes the foundation for everything we do. To feel this, all you need to do is try breathing through a straw or taking several steps upstairs after you've exhaled without breathing in again. Soon you'll find yourself gasping, longing for a full filling of your lungs with the air that gives life. Ask any singer or choir director about the importance of breath, and you'll learn that proper breathing is precisely what is needed to sing successfully. As a colleague told me recently, "All healthy singing requires a constant, steady breath support behind and under it... One of the reasons folks often struggle to sing strongly is because they have not considered, practiced, or trained their breathing in the proper way." You see, to create beautiful music with our voices, we must have constant and reliable airflow through steady breathing.

Inhale. Exhale. Inspiration. Expiration. This is the rhythm of doxology. Doxology in its most basic sense is a word of praise, a word of glory, spoken to the Lord. Doxology is our gift back to God, our offering of ourselves for God's glory. We sing doxology with our lips and with our lives. We speak it with our words and with our works: breathing in and breathing out the glory of God. We are inspired by God, and we expire back to God in thanksgiving. Praising and giving thanks, honoring and glorifying God is the beginning and ending of our lives. Doxology is life.

The foundation of our doxology, the air that supports our words and works of worship, according to the witness of scripture is God's steadfast love that endures forever. All of our breath, all of our singing, all of our praise is supported by and relies on the truth of God's enduring love. God's love that is without end is the breath of life. It's the air required for our existence. It is the constant, steady support behind and under everything we do. We are inspired—filled with life—because of it. And we expire, breathing the truth of it back out into the world. Inhaling and exhaling. Breathing becomes our doxology, as we take in and give out God's love. Every breath is praise. Every breath is a song offered back to God because of God's enduring love.

Few books of the Bible or passages of scripture declare this as frequently and repetitiously as Psalm 136. In fact, in Psalm 136, God's enduring love becomes the song itself: "For God's steadfast love endures forever." God's enduring love, the love that never quits, punctuates every verse of the entire hymn. "For God's steadfast love endures forever." The psalmist declares what the whole story of history from creation at the beginning to provision in the present reveals: that "God's steadfast love endures forever." God's enduring and steadfast love is the baseline and refrain of all life. It is the air required to sing and it is the song itself. And because of this, the psalmist begins and ends Psalm 136 with a call to the doxological life. The first three verses and the concluding one begin with the word that means "give thanks." "O give thanks to the Lord, for God is good." "O give thanks to the God of Gods." "O give thanks to the Lord of lords." "O give thanks to the God of heaven." Doxology—glorifying God in our thanks and praise—is the most authentic and fitting response from beginning to end to the gracious truth of God's enduring love.

For the psalmist, the refrain of God's enduring love is not some spiritual and distant reality detached from the particular circumstances of earthly life. No. God's enduring love is tangible, tactile, and sensory. You feel it in the earth under your feet and when the sun beats on your brow. You see it when the moon lights the night and stars

paint the sky. God's enduring love is imbedded in creation itself. In providing the very matter of life, God's faithful love that does not stop is on display. According to Psalm 136, creation testifies that God the creator loves without end. O give thanks to the Lord, for God is good.

For the psalmist, the refrain of God's enduring love is not aloof and disconnected from the realities of history. No. God's enduring love is engaged and directly involved in the everyday experiences of life. God's particular concern for and commitment to the people of Israel—that is to say, God's covenant with Israel—requires participation in the particular experiences of the people. In God's enduring love, God recognized the people's need for redemption and rescue. Seeing the people's bondage, God's enduring love compelled God to act on behalf of the people to move them from death to deliverance. According to Psalm 136, the redemption of God's people from oppressive bondage to flourishing life testifies that God the redeemer loves without end. O give thanks to the Lord, for God is good.

For the psalmist, the refrain of God's enduring love is not disconnected from the everyday provision and sustaining of life for all flesh. No. God's enduring love moves to all creation and all people. God's great and unending love provides ways forward into new life and sustenance to maintain that life. In God's steadfast love, the lowly are remembered, the endangered are rescued, and food is provided for all embodied life. In the end, God's steadfast love ensures that the forces of death and destruction do not have the final word. According to Psalm 136, the nurture and nourishment provided to all flesh testifies that God the sustainer loves without end. O give thanks to the Lord, for God is good.

Before moving on, I want to address something that if you've been reading the psalms with us throughout this summer, you have surely noticed and perhaps it has made you uncomfortable. Throughout the psalms, there is a certain confidence on the part of the person or people praying that God is on their side in history, meaning that God sides with them against others. We hear this in prayers that enemies would be destroyed and that evil opponents would be punished—often times with death. I don't know about you, but putting those words on my lips in prayer simply feels wrong. Surely my parents taught me better than that, right? Yet, so much could be said about the act of bringing all of our thoughts and feelings before God and leaving them in God's hands to judge and work as God chooses. So much could be said about how free God is to do what God wants to do in spite of how we ask God to act. So much could be said about how the most fitting place to turn in our rage over injustice and evil, even when we see it in ourselves, is to God. But for now, I'll simply emphasize that the Psalter suggests we need not worry about censorship when it comes to our interactions with God. Bring it all, the good, the bad, and the ugly before the Lord.

Yet, there is something differently difficult when we hear God's work in history narrated so completely on the side of Israel and against others. This is perhaps even more strikingly discordant when it comes up in a psalm that ceaselessly proclaims God's steadfast and enduring love. Did you feel discomfort when today's Psalm said God struck Egypt through their firstborn and struck down and killed great and famous kings? Maybe you are like me, quick to judge God for taking sides or to judge the people for creating some sort of "ancient nationalistic propaganda" (1225). But perhaps instead of writing Psalm 136 off, or simply deleting the parts of the scripture we would rather not read—a tendency all too common in the Revised Common Lectionary and frankly in most of our reading of scripture—we should instead listen carefully to what Psalm 136 teaches us about God's work in the world.

In this Psalm, the story of God's deliverance of and provision for the particular people of Israel is situated between God's creation of all things in verses 4-9 and God's provision for all flesh in verse 25. The psalmist proclaims that God's attitude toward the world and God's motivation for action are summarized by steadfast love for all. So we can understand that it is in the context of God's enduring love for the whole of creation, that God relates to and provides for a particular people. God's strategy for loving all creation is to work through the particular. Also, in this Psalm, we recognize that God takes oppression seriously and works on behalf of the lowly. We see that God is free to act in whatever way God chooses to address oppression in concrete ways. And according to the Psalm, by working on behalf of the oppressed and lowly, God reveals God's enduring love. So if you find

yourself among the down and out, the neglected, the taken advantage of, turn to the Lord knowing God makes a future open to you. And if you find yourself among the “successful at the sacrifice of others”, or the unjustly favored, or the politically powerful access-preventors, turn to the Lord in repentance because the Lord will not wait long to bring about justice for God’s oppressed children. In the end, turning to the Lord will set both the oppressor and the oppressed free to praise God for God’s enduring love.

With this perspective in mind, Psalm 136 faithfully testifies to the Triune God who creates, redeems, and sustains in and through God’s enduring love. The New Testament continues to sing this refrain as it tells the story of how God’s steadfast love is revealed in and through the particular first century Jewish man Jesus. In Jesus, the song of God’s enduring love is perfectly sung. The word in biblical Greek that most closely captures the Hebrew concept of God’s faithful, steadfast, and enduring love is *agape*. In the lesson from John’s Gospel, we hear Jesus inviting his followers to find their home, their dwelling, their abiding place in Jesus’s *agape*—in his love. Living in this love and loving one another will be for the perfection and fulfillment of their joy. Joy is the natural outflow of living in God’s enduring love. And joy naturally expresses itself in doxology. Joy pours out in songs of thanks and praise. Inhaling the air of God’s *agape* fills our whole being with joy, and we exhale in praise expressed through acts of love.

Jesus is not sentimental about this joy-fulfilling, praise-producing love. He is very concrete about the sacrifice he invites his followers to make by imitating his love. Jesus says to his disciples, “This is my commandment that you love one another, just as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, than he lay down his life for his friends.” Jesus calls his followers to sing the refrain of *agape* not only with our lips but with our lives. The song of enduring love is to fill the liturgy in our worship services and the liturgy after the liturgy, the liturgy of life. And this song may cost us everything. This love song cost Jesus his life—he laid down his life for his friends—and Jesus says to love as he has loved. Inspired by God’s enduring love, Jesus expired in God’s enduring love. Jesus breathed it in and breathed it out, and invites us to do the same.

When I was 14, I heard a preacher say that followers of Jesus were called to lay down our lives for our friends just as Jesus had done for us. For some reason, on that Sunday morning, I was certain that Jesus was saying that his love song declared through my life looked like a calling to full-time pastoral ministry. How giving up my life and “being a pastor” were connected is either a work of God or a testimony to the fact that I am the son of a pastor—and being a pastor really felt like giving up my life. Nevertheless, by the grace of God, I realized at that young age that singing the song of God’s love with my life was as concrete as giving my future plans and dreams over to God’s service. And while God may not have called you into the vocation of pastoral ministry, God is calling you into the vocation of singing of God’s enduring love with your lips and your life.

I do not know precisely what it means for you today to sing the song of God’s enduring love, but I do know it will cost you something. The writer of 1 John says it like this in my favorite John 3:16, 1 John 3:16, “We know love by this, that [Jesus] laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.” What does it look like, you may ask, well the writer responds, “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?” Sometimes love really is that straight forward. Breathe in; breathe out; God’s enduring love to sing.

As we seek to sing the song of God’s love, I’ll close us with the choristers’ prayer prayed regularly by choirs around the world, including our own who prays it at the end of each week’s rehearsal. It is a fitting prayer for us today:

Bless, O Lord, us Thy servants who minister in Thy temple.  
Grant that what we sing with our lips we may believe in our hearts,  
and what we believe in our hearts we may show forth in our lives.  
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.