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Psalm 89

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Psalm 89

(Revised Common Lectionary) (NRSV)

Introduction to Psalm 89

Psalm 89 is a wonderfully instructive Psalm for our faith, but in order fully to appreciate its wisdom and insight, it will be necessary to sketch the historical background of the rise of David to the throne of Israel. David reigned from about 1010 - 970 B.C. He was, and is remembered as, the great King of Israel, who pacified the region and extended the borders of Israel to their greatest size. He had not been born into a royal family; he had been born into a family of common shepherds from Bethlehem, from whom he had been selected to be the successor to Saul as ruler in Israel. That history is written in 1 Samuel 16:1-13. After he had achieved military success and fame, he turned his attention to peacetime pursuits, especially to the construction of a fitting House of God. That story is told in 2 Samuel 7, which is the narrative of how God gave what came to be called the Davidic Covenant. You should read both of these chapters before you read Psalm 89. The following notes will be helpful in understanding them.

In 1 Samuel 16:1-13 we are told that God rejected Saul and his heirs from being kings over Israel, and instructed the prophet Samuel to go to the home of Jesse near Bethlehem to find a more suitable person from among his eight sons. Samuel did so, interviewed the seven oldest in order, but did not find among them the one whom the LORD had chosen. Only when David, the youngest and least probable candidate, was brought before him, did Samuel get the word from the LORD, "Arise, anoint him; for this is he." Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the midst of his brothers; and the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward. Anointing was a ceremony of pouring fine olive oil over the head of the candidate for office. He was then the "anointed one," in Hebrew the "messiah." (One is tempted to make an irreverent pun; obviously any one who had had oil poured over his head would be *messy! Ah!*) Seriously, two things are important here: (1) David had been anointed and therefore was "the anointed," and (2) through the prophet Samuel he had been chosen for this office by the LORD himself.

In 2 Samuel 7 we are told how David, years later, noticed the incongruity that he, the king, was living in a splendid house, while God had no house at all. Nathan the prophet initially endorsed David's desire to build a fine house suitable for God, but God had other plans. God was not -- at the moment -- asking for a house. He had always been content to live in a portable tent, the more easily to travel wherever He might be needed. Never had He complained about not having a fine house. So he instructed Nathan to deliver a message to David:

⁸Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the LORD of hosts, "I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep, that you should be prince over my people Israel; ⁹and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. ¹⁰And I will appoint a place for my people Israel, and will plant them, that they may dwell in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and violent men shall afflict them no more, as formerly, ¹¹from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies."

God was not, after all, helpless. It was God who had brought David up from obscurity, who had given him his victories over his enemies, and who would secure his place in the memory of subsequent generations. But it was also quite clear that what God had been doing was being done for the sake of His People, that they might have a land, and live in permanent peace. As

for constructing the fine House, that was a task to be reserved for the son of David, Solomon. Notice the language that is used in the following promise of God:

**“Moreover the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. ¹² When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. ¹³ He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom for ever. ¹⁴ I will be his father, and he shall be my son. When he commits iniquity, I will chasten him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men; ¹⁵ but I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. ¹⁶ And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever before me; your throne shall be established for ever.”
¹⁷In accordance with all these words, and in accordance with all this vision, Nathan spoke to David.**

Here God inverted David's proposal. Whereas David had proposed to build a fine house, namely, a Temple for the LORD, the LORD now promised instead that He would build a house for David, namely, a dynasty. That dynasty began with David's physical descendant, Solomon, and would continue forever. It was the son of David who was to “build a house for my Name,” whose “kingdom was to be established forever,” and who was to “be the son of the Father, Yahweh,” and who was to suffer “chastening with the stripes of the sons of men,” but “from whom Father-Yahweh would never remove his steadfast love.” These are the unshakable promises of Yahweh. And when David received this Word of God, he could only respond in the prayer of thanks and adoration which follows in the chapter.

It was comparatively easy to believe and trust this LORD during the days of the first son of David, Solomon. He built the fine house for the name of the LORD, the great Solomonic Temple. And his kingdom seemed destined to last in splendor forever. But three factors began to make it increasingly difficult, if not utterly improbable, to believe in the reliability and trustworthiness, and therefore also the faithfulness and the steadfast love, of Yahweh and his promises.

1. After the death of Solomon, at the beginning of the reign of his son and successor, Rehoboam (now the second son of David/son of God), the great kingdom of David and Solomon was split into a larger and more prosperous Northern Kingdom under Jeroboam, who had successfully seceded from Jerusalem. This left Rehoboam, son of David/son of Father-Yahweh, with only the smaller rump Southern Kingdom.

2. The Southern Kingdom, the custodian and heir of the throne of David and the Temple of the Son of David, lived a politically marginal and precarious existence for some 335 years. During these years Psalm 2 was ritually recited at the coronations of the successive sons of David/sons of Father-Yahweh. (If you still have it available, you should review my February 18, 1996, study of Psalm 2 -- The Transfiguration of Our Lord.) The vision of Psalm 2 is that the Throne of the Anointed of the LORD held all the restless vassal peoples under control; though the kings of the earth plotted their *coup d' etat* against the Throne of the Anointed, they could not succeed because Yahweh himself had set His Anointed upon the Throne on Zion. To oppose that divine ordinance was a supremely laughable exercise in futility. What was so remarkable is that that vision corresponded to no contemporary historical reality. In fact, the opposite was the case; the Southern Kingdom, now known as Judah, was often a virtual vassal of larger neighboring kingdoms like Assyria. The vision of Psalm 2 was derived totally from the vision of the Davidic Covenant of 2 Samuel 7, which many held to as an unshakeable promise of Yahweh, despite current historical appearance to the contrary.

3. The destruction by the Babylonians of the Southern Kingdom in 586 B.C., following about a century and a half upon the destruction of the Northern Kingdom in 721 B.C., left no trace of the glorious Solomonic Temple. The house for the Name of God and the city of David atop Mt. Zion were destroyed. That fearful defeat put paid to any dream of living in their own land in perpetual peace. And when the Babylonians executed who they took to be the last of the Davidic dynasty and deported the Israelites into exile in the alien and Gentile country of Babylon, that crushed the sense of being God's chosen People under Yahweh's Anointed. It was now easy to give up on the God of Abraham and Moses and David, because he had been shown on the field of battle to be a weak and inferior god. It was therefore also exceedingly hard to pray Psalm 2 after 586 B.C. The premier question became: Was the Word and Promise of God, given in 2 Samuel 7 and repeatedly reiterated in Psalm 2, worthless or not? What was to be trusted: the Promise of the Davidic Covenant? Or the obvious and painful contrary evidence of Israel's own history? The resolution was that, while some may have dropped by the wayside, the mainstream of the People of God trusted that promise of God, but awaited its fulfillment sometime in the future, when the Rule (Reign, Kingdom) of God would once more come. And they expected the fulfillment to be modeled largely along the lines of the same political structure that confirmed the promise during the years of the Davidic dynasty.

When you read Psalm 89, you will notice that it seems like two different Psalms. Psalm 89:1-37 is a festive celebration of the Davidic Covenant as the expression of the steadfast love and faithfulness of Yahweh. Notice the recurrence of that combination of divine attributes in verses 1, 2, 14, 24, 33, and (in lament) verse 49. Notice too the premier manifestation of that divine steadfast love and faithfulness when God entered into covenant with David and his descendants in verses 3, 28, 34, and (in lament) verse 39. Notice further the several references to David (and his successors) as the anointed one, the messiah (verse 20, and (in lament) verses 38 and 51). Notice finally how this Psalm poetically recalls the terms of the covenant of 1 Samuel 16:1-13 and 2 Samuel 7. Psalm 89:20 recalls 1 Samuel 16; verses 22-23 recall 2 Samuel 7:9-11; verse 26 recalls the Father/son relationship established in 2 Samuel 7:14a; verses 30-32 recall the provisions for punishment in the event of disobedience in 2 Samuel 7:14b; verses 33-34 recall the limit of punishment in 2 Samuel 7:15, namely, that well-deserved punishment would never extend to removing his steadfast love from David and canceling the covenant; and verses 36-37 recall the promise of an everlastingly valid covenant in 2 Samuel 7:16. The composition of this Psalm is attributed to one Ethan the Ezrahite, of whom we know absolutely nothing further. But one can easily imagine that he might have composed this part of the Psalm during the glorious reign of Solomon. Or alternatively, he may have composed it during the darker days of the Southern Kingdom of Judah as a faith-strengthenener, when it was hard to hold on to Yahweh's promises regarding the son of David. In either case it is easy to imagine that he drew upon the words of the Davidic covenant in 2 Samuel 7 for inspiration.

But when you read Psalm 89:38-51 you step into a different world. Confidence in Yahweh has been severely shaken, if not utterly destroyed. The unthinkable has happened; Yahweh has renounced his covenant and defiled the crown (verse 39). Far from being God's agent for the peace and security of his People, the Anointed has been humiliated in complete military defeat. Verses 38-45 read like a description of the defeat at the hands of the Babylonians in 586 B.C. Verses 46-48 are a near-despairing lament, an anguished Psalmist asking God how long his wrath would go on. And verses 49-51 appeal under their shameful duress for a return of the experience of God's steadfast love and faithfulness. It is easy to imagine that this part of the Psalm is an appendix written in the wake of the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem, perhaps in the Exile in Babylon. I like to think that the author of this portion of the Psalm was a Davidic descendant, because he took the loss of the throne and the ensuing disgrace so personally as a suffering servant (verse 50).

In the formatting of Psalm 89 below I have boxed those excerpts that have been chosen for liturgical inclusion for the Fifth Sunday of Pentecost (Revised Common Lectionary).

Psalm 89
A Maskil of Ethan the Ezrahite
(Revised Common Lectionary) (NRSV)

I.

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|---|
| <p>¹ I will sing of <i>your steadfast love</i>, O LORD, forever; with my mouth I will proclaim <i>your faithfulness</i> to all generations.</p> <p>² I declare that <i>your steadfast love</i> is established forever; <i>your faithfulness</i> is as firm as the heavens.</p> <p>³ You said, “I have made a COVENANT with my chosen one, I have sworn to my servant David:</p> <p>⁴ ‘I will establish your descendants forever, and build your throne for all generations.’ ”</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>Selah</i></p> |
|---|

These verses state the theme of this Psalm. They are a celebration of the steadfast love and faithfulness of the LORD. The steadfast love of the LORD points to the constancy of his love, often in contrast to the fickleness of our love for the LORD. His faithfulness points to the reliability and trustworthiness of his love, and particularly of his sworn promises. The best image for such complete reliability is the heavens above, whose durability is almost axiomatic. This is the God who has sworn to his servant David that his kingdom will last forever.

II.

⁵ **Let the heavens praise your wonders, O LORD,
your faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones.**

⁶ **For who in the skies can be compared to the LORD?
Who among the heavenly beings is like the LORD,**

⁷ **a God feared in the council of the holy ones,
great and awesome above all that are around him?**

Since the LORD's steadfastness and faithfulness is firm as the heavens, the heavens themselves are now bidden to praise God. And not only the heavens, but all the inhabitants of the heavens. The picture here is of the heavens as the dwelling place of the heavenly beings and the holy ones. These are either the gods of the other nations or the angels, who sit together in an assembly or in the council of heaven. In either case, the Psalmist makes it clear that Yahweh is above them all and finally cannot be compared to any them.

⁸ **O LORD God of hosts,
who is as mighty as you, O LORD?
Your faithfulness surrounds you.**

⁹ **You rule the raging of the sea;
when its waves rise, you still them.**

- 10 You crushed Rahab** (a mythological sea monster representing the forces of chaos and evil) **like a carcass;**
you scattered your enemies with your mighty arm.
- 11 The heavens are yours, the earth also is yours;**
the world and all that is in it—you have founded them.
- 12 The north and the south—you created them;**
Tabor (a 1675-foot peak) **and Hermon** (an 8940-foot mountain) **joyously praise your name.**
- 13 You have a mighty arm;**
strong is your hand, high your right hand.

The distinguishing characteristic of the LORD is that he is the Creator, and that with his almighty power he rules the unruly. He is the God of all the heavenly hosts (armies and powers) and no one can match his strength. But the chief feature of the almighty LORD is his faithfulness as the Creator. He can be depended upon to run an orderly, predictable, reliable ship.

- 14 Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne;**
steadfast love and faithfulness go before you (as your messengers).

Here righteousness and justice join steadfast love and faithfulness in the description of God. The righteousness of God is that attribute by which we may be certain that he will do the right thing – as *he* reveals the right. And God's justice is that attribute by which he overcomes all contrary evil to right the wrong and makes justice to prevail over injustice. These are foundational in the rule (reign, kingdom) of God.

- 15 Blessed are the people who know the festal shout,**
who walk, O LORD, in the light of your countenance;
- 16 they exult in your name all day long,**
and extol your righteousness.
- 17 For you are the glory of their strength;**
by your favor our horn is exalted (God is pleased to make us stronger than our enemies).
- 18 For our shield** (against our enemies = our king, descended from David) **belongs to the LORD**
 (because he was chosen by the LORD),
our king to the Holy One of Israel.

The LORD does not live in and for himself; he has a People. And blessed are they who live among that People. The Hebrew word translated "festal shout" is the same word used of the shout of the Israelites when the walls of Jericho fell (Joshua 6:20), when Israel was participant and agent of the victory of God over his enemies. The People of God do not walk in darkness, but in a light that emanates from the face of God. The Aaronic benediction blesses the People, "The LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you. The LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace" (Numbers 6:25-26). We can rejoice, because God's People have a king, the son of David/son of Father-Yahweh, who himself belongs to the LORD. Of particular interest here is the designation of God as the Holy One of Israel. It emphasizes the character of God as holy, that he has brought Israel into an exclusive relationship with himself as his own People, and that in this sense Israel too is, and is to be, a holy People. In only two other places in the Psalms is this name used; one is Psalm 71:22 in a context that extols the faithfulness of Yahweh; and again in Psalm 78:41. It is a name for the LORD that is used twenty-six times by the prophet Isaiah.

III.

- 19 **Of old you spoke in a vision to your faithful one(s)** (the prophets Samuel and Nathan), **and said:**
 **“I have set the crown on one who is mighty,
 I have exalted one chosen from the people.**
- 20 **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 (David shall be stronger than his foes).
- 25 **I will set his** (left) **hand on the sea** (the Mediterranean Sea)
 and his right hand on the rivers (the Euphrates River).
- 26 **He shall cry to me, ‘You are my Father,
 my God, and the Rock of my salvation!’**
- 27 **I will make** (confer upon) **him the** (rank and privileges of 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.”**
- Selah***

This section recalls the terms of the Davidic covenant as given in 2 Samuel 7. Perhaps especially notable in this section is the fact that verse 26 is one of the very rare places in the

Old Testament where an individual addresses God as “My Father!” It indicates the special relationship that the Davidic king enjoys with Yahweh, who adopts him as his son (Psalm 2:7), as he had adopted David before him (2 Samuel 7:14). It adds to the conviction that the Davidic covenant is secured by God’s unbreakable oath (verses 34-35).

IV.

- 38 But now you have spurned and rejected him;
you are full of wrath against *your anointed*.**
- 39 You have renounced the COVENANT with your servant;
you have defiled his crown in the dust.**
- 40 You have broken through all his walls;
you have laid his strongholds in ruins.**
- 41 All who pass by plunder him;
he has become the scorn of his neighbors.**
- 42 You have exalted the right hand of his foes;
you have made all his enemies rejoice.**
- 43 Moreover, you have turned back the edge of his sword,
and you have not supported him in battle.**
- 44 You have removed the scepter from his hand,
and hurled his throne to the ground.**
- 45 You have cut short the days of his youth;
you have covered him with shame.**

Selah

Every king in the Davidic dynasty had carried the same promise and hope of the Anointed. It had become, as it were, a part of the job description. Hence, when references was made, as in verse 38, to “your Anointed,” the reference did not necessarily apply to any particular individual office-holder, but to the office itself, with all the hopes and dreams and expectations attached to that office.

- 46 How long, O LORD? Will you hide yourself forever?
How long will your wrath burn like fire?**
- 47 Remember how short my time is—
for what vanity you have created all mortals!**
- 48 Who can live and never see death?
Who can escape the power of Sheol?**

Selah

The Psalmist wants to experience the return of the gracious LORD during his lifetime. He is saying that, if God is going to come out of hiding, it must happen soon, because all of us mortals die. If it does not happen soon, he shall go the way of all flesh and not see the goodness of the LORD. He is impatient and is not content with a return of the LORD in later generations.

- 49 Lord, where is *your steadfast love of old*,
which by *your faithfulness* you swore to David?**
- 50 Remember, O Lord, how your servant is taunted;
how I bear in my bosom the insults of the peoples,**
- 51 with which your enemies taunt, O LORD,
with which they taunted the footsteps of *your anointed*.**

The haunting question here lies in verse 49. If you cannot rely on the oath of God, then where can we possibly turn? It is an utterly unthinkable thought that God's Word is not trustworthy. And it is with that poignant question that the Psalm ends. No answer is given to the question "When?" and "Where?"

**52 Blessed be the LORD forever!
Amen and Amen.**

This verse is not part of the Psalm. It is the concluding doxology of Book Three (Psalms 73-89) of the Psalter. You will find similar concluding doxologies concluding Book One (Psalm 41:13) and Book Two (Psalm 72:18-19).

The Prayer from the LBW to accompany Psalm 89:

Mighty God, in fulfillment of the promise made to David's descendants you established a lasting covenant through your firstborn Son. You anointed your servant Jesus with holy oil and raised him higher than all kings on earth. Remember your covenant, so that we who are signed with the blood of your Son may sing of your mercies forever; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Some Further Reflections:

I hope that it has become obvious how the principal features of the Davidic covenant are a pointer forward to Jesus Christ in the New Testament.

1. It is important for the New Testament that Jesus is a physical descendant of David, the Son of David. See, for example, how Matthew's genealogy of Jesus in 1:1-17 traces his line through David. Or again, how at the time of his triumphal entry into Jerusalem he was celebrated as the Son of David (Mt. 21:9; Mark 11:10). Or finally, note St. Paul's acclamation in Romans 1:3.
2. It is important for the New Testament that Jesus is not only son of David, but also, and much more importantly, that he is the Son of God the Father. See Matthew 11:25ff.
3. Jesus in his Passion endured rods and stripes and death of punishment, albeit vicariously.
4. Jesus, in contrast to those other sons of David whose earthly kingdoms came to an historical end, is the one whose kingdom shall have no end, because he establishes the promised everlasting kingdom of peace in his resurrection from the dead.

5. Jesus builds the eternal house for the Name of the LORD in his own crucified and resurrected body (John 2:21-22).
6. Jesus came to be recognized as “the Christ,” even though he had not been anointed with oil. The New Testament epistle to the Hebrews 1:9 cites Psalm 45 (another royal psalm):6-7 as being fulfilled in a kind of spiritual anointing of Jesus, the eternal Son of God. But in every other respect he had fulfilled the terms of the office of the Christ. Indeed, the office had given him his surname; he is now known to us as Jesus Christ.

When Christians pray this Psalm today, they may think historically of David and in a sense pray this Psalm with our ancestors in the faith. They too are a part of the “communion of saints” with whom we confess our faith in THE Son of David, they in anticipation, we in fulfillment. But we pray only in partial fulfillment; for we too still must look forward to the final Full-fulfillment of the reign of Christ.

Psalm 89, as we have it in the Psalter, is a kind of Old Testament Good Friday Psalm. It rehearses the sure and certain promises of God in the Davidic Covenant, yet finds them seemingly dashed in the brutal experience of the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem and the ensuing Exile. We Christians can learn from this that the promises of God to David regarding his Descendant and Kingdom were larger than could possibly have been fulfilled in any merely temporal realm, for temporal realms are always tainted and temporary. They bring no lasting peace and are always subject to the limitations of human sin and weakness. We can therefore pray this Psalm as a rehearsal of God’s deeper promises and deeper intentions, which have been revealed in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, THE Christ.

The promised fulfillment that he seemed to be bringing awakened Messianic expectations which were attached to him, expectations that were very similar to those described in Psalm 89:1-37. But these too were dashed by the death of Jesus, which seemed to end all Messianic hopes for the future. Like everyone and everything else, the Jesus-movement seemed to have ended in death. Such was the conclusion as said by the two disciples on the way to Emmaus (Luke 24:20-21). Perhaps unknowingly, they were giving new content and fresh relevance to Psalm 89:38-51. The pattern of the Old Testament experience with the Word of God was being reenacted in Jesus: promise engendering hope, weak and sinful bearers of that hope, death and destruction placing that promise in question. Until the resurrection of Jesus to death-proof life! That is now the New Promise that cannot be shaken.

When we are overtaken by our own experiences of death, destruction, punishment, persecution, seeming God-abandonment, then we are at the point of Psalm 89:49 with its heart-rending question: “Lord, where is your steadfast love of old, which by your faithfulness you swore to David?” Only now, in the new and fulfilled **COVENANT** of Christ, we can confess a **STEADFAST LOVE** and **FAITHFULNESS** of God far larger than can be envisioned in the terms of a Davidic kingdom. It is all of what is good in the Davidic kingdom – and so much more than the Psalmist could imagine! It is all of what is good in the life of Christ, Son of David and Son of God -- and so much more than we can imagine!

Nugget

Forgive me, Lord Jesus, for the things I have done that make me feel uncomfortable in Thy presence. All the front that I polish so carefully for men (=others) to see, does not deceive Thee. For Thou fully knowest every thought that has left its shadow on my memory. Thou hast marked every motive that curdled something sweet within me. I acknowledge, with sorrow and true repentance, that

I have desired that which I should not have;
I have toyed with what I knew was not for me;
I have been preoccupied with self-interest;
I have invited unclean thoughts into my mind and entertained them as honored guests;
My ears have often been deaf to Thy whisper;
My eyes have been often blind to the signs of Thy guidance.

Make me willing to be changed, even though it requires surgery of the soul, and the therapy of discipline. Make my heart warm and soft, that I may receive and accept, now, the blessings of Thy forgiveness, and the benediction of Thy “Depart in peace ... and sin no more.” Amen.

Peter Marshall

Nugget

People who hope are not people who have a vague sense that things will work out all right. People who hope are those who know the name of God and God’s characteristic gifts: steadfast love, compassion, and faithfulness, the three great qualities that eventuate in the wholeness of shalom.

People who hope have complete confidence in God’s coming shalom, a rule of order, peace, security, justice, and abundance. Without denying any present disorder or confusion or distortion, people who hope and watch and wait and pray and expect know that God’s shalom is as good as done. People who hope are people who act in the conviction that God’s future is reliably present tense and therefore act upon it before it is fully in hand.

The future is not fully *in* hand, but it is *at* hand, and therefore Jews and Christians count on the winner who has yet to do the winning. And they are permitted to ask: What happens (present tense) if God’s future is secure? The answer is: God’s future is enacted as present neighborliness.

If God’s future were *not* sure, then the present should be shaped and propelled by greed, injustice, exploitation, brutality, and barbarism. Those are the fruits of an atheism that believes there is no future from God. Those are the fruits of an idolatry that has God confused with militarism, racism, sexism, ageism, and ethnic privilege. But both Jews and Christians are called beyond such self-serving atheism and such self-destructive idolatry. The commands of the Torah are rooted in God’s coming shalom.

Jesus, of course, was fully instructed by rabbinic teachers when he names the two great commandments. “Love God and love the neighbor.” The had asked him for one commandment, but he said, in effect, “You cannot have just one, you always get two. You always get the neighbor with God.

We now live in a society that wants to separate God and neighbor, to keep something of God without the neighbor who came with God. But that is futile. God’s coming shalom, which is sure for the world, is a gift of neighborliness. Widow, orphan, illegal immigrant, poor, homeless, disabled, homosexual – all count, all are citizens of God’s shalom.

Faced then with a crushing loss – the destruction of Jerusalem or the death of Jesus, the defeat of goodness or the defiance of decency – Jews and Christians respond by doggedly recalling the enduring evidence of God’s love, compassion, and faithfulness. Emerging from those memories is a deep and unshakeable hope, a conviction that the present setbacks will never smother God’s future. Such a hope generates confidence and conviction; confidence in the ultimacy of God’s power, and conviction that the path of this power winds its way through the neighborhood we call the world.

Biblical theologian Walter Brueggemann
As quoted in Martin Marty’s *Context*, June 15, 1999

Walter E. Keller

June 27, 1999 – **The Fifth Sunday after Pentecost**