

The Steadfast Love of God  
Isaiah 63:7-9  
A sermon by Katie Saari

This week I've been pondering the experience of human suffering and sorrow in the midst of the holiday season. December 6th marked the five-year anniversary of the death of one of my friends. My friend Hai Qiu, who was from China, died in a car accident while driving to meet me and another friend to go ice skating. For some reason, his death has hit me hard again this year. I decided that I needed to do something to commemorate this anniversary of his death, so I made a donation to Howard Community College toward a scholarship for immigrant students. I hope it will help an immigrant begin his or her studies. I also wrote his parents a letter telling them of my donation. I hope my letter will be a source of comfort, showing them that Hai's friends still remember him.

I spoke this week with someone whose parent is in the process of dying. I learned that Marcus Matthews, our bishop lost both his mother-in-law and a beloved aunt within the last few weeks. For people who are mourning a loss at this time of year, Christmas can seem empty, the joy of the season fleeting. At such times, we need to remember God's steadfast love. We need to be reminded of the ways in which God has loved his people throughout time and the ways in which God loves us today. We also need to do what we can to love those who are suffering.

Today's reading from Isaiah highlights God's love for humanity. We see words like steadfast love and mercy to describe the feeling God has for his people. There is mention of the great goodness God has given the people of Israel and how he has

redeemed and saved them. We learn that in all the people's affliction, God was afflicted, and God lifted them up and carried them.

This passage from Isaiah is widely believed to refer to the Exodus, the penultimate example of God's love in the Old Testament. When God calls Moses to lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, God says to him, "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey" (Exodus 3:7-8). God saw the misery of the people, heard their cries, knew their sufferings, and came down to deliver them. This pattern of God observing and experiencing human distress, and then acting to relieve it is seen throughout the Bible. It is a pattern based in God's capacity to love and to act out of that love for the good of humanity.

It is a pattern that is seen vividly in the person of Jesus Christ. At one point in the gospel of Mark, the twelve apostles return from a missionary trip, and Jesus invites them to a deserted place to rest. But the crowds are so eager to be with them that the crowds rush on ahead to where Jesus and the apostles are going. It would be as if a group of pastors went away on a retreat only to find that their congregations were waiting for them at the retreat center. But rather than get angry, Mark says that Jesus "had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things" (Mark 6:34). Jesus sees that the people need guidance. He feels compassion. He takes action to give them what they need, in this case teaching. Interestingly enough, after this passage comes one of the stories of Jesus feeding the 5,000. Once again, Jesus

sees a need – this time for food – and he acts to meet it. The overwhelming nature of the need does not deter him. His gracious love is sufficient to meet the needs of the crowd, whether the need is for guidance or for food.

Jesus also observes and experiences human suffering and tries to alleviate it in the face of death. John chapter 11 tells us that when his friend Lazarus died, Jesus went to see Lazarus's family. We are told that when he saw Lazarus's sister Mary and her friends crying, "he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved." He began to weep. Then Jesus called Lazarus to come out from the tomb, and he did. Jesus was moved by the sorrow of the mourners. When he raised Lazarus from the dead, he relieved that sorrow. He also gave them a sign that his power extends beyond death. This sign is one of hope that death is not the end of life. Raising Lazarus is also a sign of the power of Jesus' love, a love that is active even beyond the grave.

Colossians chapter 1 says that Jesus is "the image of the invisible God." This means that when we look at Jesus, we see God. The famous hymn-writer, Charles Wesley, in his hymn, "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling" expresses that the God we see in Jesus is pure love. The hymn begins, "Love divine, all loves excelling, joy of heaven, to earth come down." It continues, "Jesus, thou art all compassion, pure, unbounded love thou art." Wesley says that Jesus is the pure love of God come to earth. Like the portrait of God we see in the Exodus, the God we see in Jesus is a God of compassion, a God of steadfast love, a God who experiences human suffering and acts to relieve it.

Such a God as this is one that we can trust with our suffering. Such a God as this observes our suffering, experiences it, and tries to relieve it. Sometimes the suffering and the relief are on a broad scale. God sees the suffering of the Israelites in bondage and

works through Moses to free them. Sometimes the suffering is less severe or on a smaller scale. Jesus sees people who are like sheep without a shepherd, and he gives them guidance. He sees people who are hungry, and he feeds them. Jesus sees people mourning, and he weeps with them. Jesus shows people new life in a situation where they see only death. It can be difficult to feel God's presence when we are suffering. But the Bible shows us that God is present with us in our pain, loving us, and working to ease that pain. I remember a friend of mine sharing that, when she was going through a difficult time, one day she heard God's voice saying, "Don't worry. I love you and you can trust me." I believe that this was God being present with her and acting in love to relieve her suffering.

God's loving presence is also available to us through the actions of other people. In Jesus, God came to earth to directly express love in human form. But even when Jesus was alive, he relied on his apostles to extend his work. After the resurrection, Jesus returned to heaven, and the Holy Spirit came to humans as God's constant spiritual presence. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, people did amazing things to relieve human suffering. According to Acts, Peter healed a man who was lame; the early Christians solved the problem of poverty by holding all their possessions in common; and Peter realized that it was wrong to exclude Gentiles from the people of God. All of these are examples of God working through the early Christians to relieve suffering. Today, God continues to work with and through humans to extend his compassionate love in ways that redeem suffering and deliver us from our distress.

In my own life, I believe that God inspired me to do something to commemorate the five-year anniversary of my friend Hai's death and to share that with his parents. I hope that my actions will help them experience God's love for them and for their son.

This week, if you know someone who is experiencing suffering or loss, reach out to that person in love. Let God work through you to express his steadfast love. If you are experiencing suffering or loss yourself, let yourself be loved, by God and by other people. The steadfast love of the Lord endures forever. God expressed that love in calling Moses to free the Israelites. God embodied that love in the person of Jesus Christ. God extends that love to us today. Praise be to God! Amen.