The psalmist makes three major assertions. **Assertion #1: God treated the Israelites with love and kindness, showering upon them incredible blessings***.* Proving this assertion, the psalm says that God: “worked marvels in the land of Egypt” (v. 12); “divided the sea and let them pass through it” (v. 13); “led them with a cloud, and all night long with a fiery light” (v. 14); “split rocks open in the wilderness and gave them drink abundantly as from the deep” (v. 15); “made streams come out of the rock and caused waters to flow down like rivers” (v. 16); “rained down on them manna to eat, and gave them the grain of heaven…[and] sent them food in abundance” (vv. 23-25) until “They ate and were well filled, for [God] gave them what they craved” (v. 29).

The Psalmist makes a case that Israel’s God is diligent and devoted. No one can seriously argue that God failed or neglected or rejected Israel. God had been their God, and they had been God’s people. Rather, it is the case that the people have forgotten God. Psalm 78 reminds us of the goodness of God.

**Assertion #2: The Israelites take these blessings for granted, and by their wicked behavior, insult the One who blessed them***.* The psalmist prepares an itemized list of misdemeanors and wrongful acts by which the Israelites pretty much thumbed their noses at God: “In spite of all [God’s provision] they still sinned and did not believe in [God’s] wonders” (v. 32). The people rebelled against the Most High (v. 17, 40); tested God in their heart by demanding the food they craved (v. 18); spoke against God, saying, “Can God spread a table in the wilderness?” (v. 19); flattered God with their mouths but lied to God with their tongues (v. 36); wavered in their loyalty and proved unfaithful to God’s covenant (v. 37); provoked the Holy One of Israel (v. 41); forgot God’s power and redeeming acts (vv. 42-43); did not observe God’s decrees (vv. 56-57). That is a LONG list of crimes and misdemeanors!

Psalm 78 reminds us of our own tendency to test God’s patience, of our own inclination to rebel, and of our own propensity to wander far from God’s love and care.When children behave badly, we understand that they do this *because they are children*. They test boundaries. They push limits. Their world is quite narrow, and they are the center of it. Children fail to realize that parents may act in disciplinary ways that seem punitive, but which will ultimately shape their lives in positive ways.

This seems to be the case with the ancient Israelites who thought they could tell God what to do and how to do it. They forgot that God is God and they are not. They failed to recognize that sometimes God demonstrates God’s love for God’s people in many ways including disciplinary ways.

**Assertion #3: God sent numerous punishments to shock the errant Israelites into compliance and to give them an appreciation of their many blessings***.* God does not hold back. God lets the people have it, and not just once, but again and again. The recital of God’s wrath against God’s people reads like a rap sheet. It is not pretty. If we are being honest, the description of God’s disciplinary actions in response to the behavior of God’s people is shocking.

In his book, *The God Delusion,* Richard Dawkins, Oxford professor, ethologist, evolutionary biologist, and one of the so-called “new atheists,” wrote: “The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.” Psalm 78 does not disabuse anyone of this conclusion. Here, God appears completely manic and overly abusive, a common view of God in the evolving understanding of the nature of God in those ancient days.

But this is not how we understand God today. Thousands of years ago, when crops failed, children died, pestilence ravaged the land, or locusts devoured the crops, the people of God took stock of their wickedness and attributed their misfortunes to an irritated God. Jonathan Edwards classified them as “sinners in the hands of an angry God.”

Make no mistake: God is powerful and capable of providing harsh discipline when needed. But because of Jesus Christ, who died to erase our sins and who rose again with the promise of new life, we are afforded an unmerited second chance to live as God’s covenant people. As disciples of Jesus, we need not fear the wrath of God, but can, instead, accept the challenge to Give-Thanks and to Live-Right.

**The Give-Thanks Challenge** is a call toexpress gratitude for the many blessings in our lives. We give thanks to God for the good things that come our way. Even if God had nothing to with them, we should thank God anyway. God did not give you the promotion at work. Thank God anyway! God did not give your team the victory. Thank God anyway! God did not cause your business to prosper. Thank God anyway! God did not give you an A on your exam. Thank God anyway! God did not give you a good parking space. Thank God anyway!

The Bible says we should give thanks in *all* things (1 Thessalonians 5:18). God did not cause the roof to leak; give God thanks that you have a house on which a roof can sit. God did not give you cancer; give God thanks for the skillful and compassionate care of oncologists and nurses. God did not cancel the baseball season; thank God for the many other entertainment opportunities you have. God did not cause so-and-so to say bad things about you; be grateful for the true friends you have. You get the idea!

**The Live-Right Challenge.** This psalm also challenges us to live in such a way that a “timeout” will not even be on the table. In fact, rather than being *timeout* Christians, the Bible calls us to be *time-in* Christians. We are called to spend time in serving others; time in study and prayer; time in offering our skills and talents; time in witnessing to the love of Christ; time in obedience to the Word of God; time in fellowship with other believers; time in bearing the burdens of others. When we are living as “time-in” Christians, we will not need to worry about a timeout. Rather than giving God a headache, we can embrace the Give-Thanks Challenge and the Live-Right Challenge. This is behavior that is pleasing to God. Amen.

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**Time-out or Time-in?**

Sunday, September 27, 2020 Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Being a parent is not for the faint of heart. Actress and neuroscientist, Mayim Bialik (of *The Big Bang Theory* fame) once confessed: “I came to parenting the way most of us do — knowing nothing and trying to learn everything.” Comedian Jim Gaffigan states, “I don’t know what’s more exhausting about parenting: the getting up early or acting like you know what you’re doing.” Actor Ewan MacGregor (*Star Wars’* Obi Wan Kenobi) admits: “The thing about parenting rules is there aren’t any. That’s what makes it so difficult.” Actor Alan Arkin concludes, “No matter how much time you spend reading books or following your intuition, you’re gonna screw it up. Fifty times. You can’t do parenting right.”

Parenting is hard work. For sure, a newborn child is a “bundle of joy”; but very soon, he or she is a handful of aggravation. Parents are often surprised to observe how quickly children quickly develop a mind and a will of their own. So, what do you do? One tried and true parenting tactic is the “timeout.” In a “timeout,” a child can calm down, consider a positive course of action, and re-enter the world of gracious living without causing upset and commotion. Truth be told, a “timeout” gives both parents and children the breathing space they need to regroup and reengage. A timeout recognizes, as one writer suggests, that “all punishments are ineffective…because the vast majority of kids don’t misbehave; they *behave*. They behave like kids.”

In Psalm 78, we discover that God is fed up with the Israelites, who are behaving like kids. Our partial reading shows us *only the goodness of God*; but to understand the psalm’s full intent we need to read the whole psalm. In those 72 verses, we see that God is having none of this business of letting kids be kids. God believes that the Israelites are behaving badly, and God seeks to correct their bad behavior. This psalm is a brief history of the relationship between the divine Parent and God’s incorrigible children.