

Epiphany 6, Year A, 2014  
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY  
The Rev. Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

On Tuesday night at Bible study,  
we read the longest book of the bible.  
Does anyone know what it is?

Psalm 119, and this morning  
we have read  
just the first eight verses of it.

But it goes on  
for another one hundred sixty eight verses, one hundred seventy six verses in all, twenty two  
groups  
of eight verses.

To us, in English,  
it just looks like a really long psalm  
that says pretty much the same thing  
over and over and over again.

But if you were to read it in Hebrew, the way it was originally written,  
you would see that each of those twenty-two groups of verses  
begins with a different letter of the alphabet,  
and each verse within the group  
begins with the same letter.  
And that made it easy to remember.  
Eight things that begin with aleph.  
Eight things that begin with bet.  
Eight things that begin with gimel.  
Eight things that begin with dalet.  
And so on, all the way through  
the alphabet.  
It was a way of remembering,  
a way of meditating,  
a way of focussing.

But what is it remembering? What is it focussing on?

It all begins with these words, which we read today,  
eight verses beginning with aleph,

אֲשֶׁר יֵשׁוּב בְּתוֹרַת יְהוָה.  
- הַהֲלֵלָם, בְּתוֹרַת יְהוָה.

“Happy are they whose way is blameless,  
who walk in the law of the LORD!”

The law of the Lord.

And immediately we begin asking questions.

Law of God?

What’s it talking about?

Isn’t that the whole point of Jesus, that we don’t have to follow the laws of the Old Testament any more?

And it doesn’t improve as we read on.

Law, decrees, commandments, statutes, judgments.

All this focus on rules.

And most of us, in our hearts, aren’t so keen on rules.

Laws might be a necessity,

but for the most part

something they’re we’d rather do without.

But this psalm

isn’t really talking about laws as we tend think of them.

It’s talking about Torah,

the way of God that is revealed in the first five books of the bible.

It includes laws, rules, commandments,

but it means so much more.

Those first five books of the bible

include stories, about how the people of God came to be,  
their history, their identity.

They tell the story of creation,

of Cain and Abel,

of Noah,

of Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob.

They tell of Joseph and his brothers,

and the famines that led the people of God

to refuge in Egypt,

and they tell of their exodus from Egypt, and their wandering in the desert,

and their final arrival

at the brink of the promised

land.

And embedded in the stories  
 are laws. Commandments. Rules.  
 But they aren't just there  
 for their own sake.  
 Arbitrary rules  
 to distinguish the people of God  
 from other people, though they do  
 do that.  
 No,  
 they are there  
 to guide the people, and to protect them.

As you probably seen in the bulletin, in May  
 I'll leading a pilgrimage hike in Scotland and England.  
 Since I've been here at St James, I've walked four of these pilgrimage trails in Scotland and  
 England.  
 And each of the trails  
 has a different marker. For St Cuthbert's Way has a St Cuthbert's Cross, St Oswald's Way has a  
 bird in flight, Two Saint's Way has a cross and swan, and the Pilgrim's Trail a shell.

If you've walked any of the Appalachian Trail, you'll have seen the same thing. White blazes for  
 the main trail, blue blazes for side trails.

Most of the time when you walk,  
 you follow the trail pressed into the ground by the feet of the people who have gone before you.  
 But at the points where there might be some doubt about which way to go,  
 you need those markers  
 to show you which way to go.  
 Sometimes  
 you miss them,  
 and find yourself as I did when I missed a couple of waymarks on St Cuthbert's Way,  
 following sheep paths as I scrambled down a rocky hill,  
 and picking my way between boggy patches on the moors.  
 Every time you miss the way  
 it adds extra time to your journey,  
 and often danger as well.  
 One time  
 I simple sat down in the shelter of a stone wall  
 and waited for fog to lift. I couldn't find the next marker,  
 and I wasn't sure if what was ahead was a gentle slope down to the town  
 or a cliff face.  
 The waymarks

show you the way,  
 the best way, the safest way,  
 the sure way  
 to reaching your destination.

The law  
 the Torah,  
 is more like the waymarks  
 for a hiking trail  
 than the federal law code.

Remember  
 our reading from Deuteronomy?

Moses tells the people,  
 "See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess...

Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob."

Following the way marks,  
 following Torah  
 is about choosing blessing,  
 choosing life.

And so we go back to our psalm,  
 this first section of psalm 119,  
 eight things that begin with aleph,  
 not so much a cohesive argument  
 as a kind of brainstorm  
 about following the way of God.

"Happy are they whose way is blameless,  
 who walk in the law of the LORD!"

Another translation is  
 Happy are they that are upright in the way,  
 who walk in the law of the LORD.

Standing tall, walking steadily towards God.

“Happy are they who observe his decrees  
and seek him with all their hearts!”

Following the way of God  
is about more than obeying rules.  
It’s about seeking God  
with our hearts,  
focussing our love and attention on God,  
always trying  
to take one step more  
towards him  
in everything we do.

“Who never do any wrong,  
but always walk in his ways.”

All of us do wrong  
at one time or another.  
We can’t help it.  
It’s part of the human condition.  
But by the grace of God in Jesus Christ  
we are always invited to return,  
always invited to step back onto that pilgrimage path.

“You laid down your commandments,  
that we should fully keep them.”

God’s way, God’s waymarks  
are clear.  
Jesus summarized them this way -  
“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength, and love your  
neighbor as yourself.”  
All the law of God  
boiled down  
into two simple commandments.

And still we can’t keep them.  
Still we struggle.

But we know what they are.

“Oh, that my ways were made so direct  
that I might keep your statutes!”

We wish  
that it was easier to follow God.  
Remember what the apostle Paul said,  
“For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.”  
It’s the very nature of evil that it gets its tentacles wrapped  
into our lives,  
and that alone  
we can’t do  
what we know to be right,  
that we can’t follow God  
on our own.  
Sometimes we just wish  
that God could fix it,  
fix us.  
And God will, but not this side  
of heaven.

“Then I should not be put to shame,  
when I regard all your commandments.”

We don’t want to have to face God  
having failed.

And here is the gospel, here is the good news.  
We don’t have to.  
Jesus has faced God  
with our failure,  
and God has forgiven us.  
It’s doesn’t give us a free pass  
to do whatever we want,  
but it does free us from the burden  
of guilt  
and shame.

“I will thank you with an unfeigned heart,  
when I have learned your righteous judgments.”

And our response to that freedom,  
our response to that mercy,  
our response to that grace  
is to say thank you  
to God.

“I will keep your statutes;  
do not utterly forsake me.”

And we're left with a hope,  
a dream, a prayer,  
we're left hanging  
with the hope that we will follow God  
with our hearts and minds and souls and strength  
and love our neighbors as ourselves,  
but knowing  
that we will inevitably fail.  
We're human.

But God does not fail.  
God will not forsake us.  
That's the promise of the cross,  
where Christ is forsaken for our sake,  
that's the promise of the risen Lord  
who breathes his life  
into their lives  
and gives them his Spirit.  
God will not forsake us.

Happy are they whose way is blameless,  
who walk in the law of the LORD!