

Sermon for Sunday, March 15, 2015
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
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Today
is the fourth Sunday in Lent,
the fourth Sunday
of this season of preparation
for the holy week when we remember Christ's death
and the great celebration of his resurrection
at Easter.

And this Sunday,
halfway through the season,
is traditionally known
as Refreshment Sunday,
a day when the strict fasts of Lent
could be relaxed,
and when our perspective shifts slightly.
Easter is in sight;
and so
our Lenten focus on sin
gives way
to a focus on grace,
that immeasurable gift,
as we heard in the letter to the Ephesians,
that God offers us
in Jesus Christ.

And so the tone of our psalm today
is one of thanksgiving.

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,
and his mercy endures for ever.

Those words are familiar to us:
they are said again and again, not only in this psalm
but in the one before it,
and in psalm 118,
and in the psalm that we use each year at our annual meeting to focus our prayers, psalm
136, where the second line of every verse

is “for his mercy endures for ever.”
 Again and again and again
 giving thanks to God.

But this thanksgiving
 is not just generic.
 It has a particular focus.
 And that is
 God’s mercy.

The word here, that we translate mercy,
 is *hesed*, or in Hebrew, חסד.
 That word might sound familiar. It’s where the word hasidic comes from.
 In Jewish tradition, to be a *hasid*
 was to be someone who was faithful to the covenant,
 but more than that, one who went above and beyond the requirements of the law.

And when we talk about God’s *hesed*,
 God’s mercy, as it’s translated in our prayer book,
 we’re talking about the very nature of God,
 God who has a covenant with us,
 a formal relationship,
 but who goes far beyond that,
 offering mercy, yes, and grace, and love, and kindness, and commitment.

We first see the idea of God’s *hesed* in scripture
 in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah
 when Abraham’s nephew Lot
 thanks God for his *hesed*
 in letting him escape the destruction of the cities.

And all through the stories of the patriarchs,
 of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob,
 we hear of God’s *hesed*,
 God’s love and mercy and kindness and grace
 surrounding them
 as work out what it means
 to follow this God of theirs.

And then we come to Moses

and we hear again of God's *hesed*.
Remember the story of the ten commandments?
Moses goes up on Mount Sinai
and there is thunder and lightning
and a thick cloud and the sound of trumpets,
and forty days later
he comes back down to the people
carrying two tablets of stone
with the commandments written on them.
But the people have figured
that Moses is never coming back,
that both he and his God
have abandoned them,
so they do the next best thing they know how,
they follow the traditions
of their captors back in Egypt
and their forebears before the time of Abraham,
and they make a statue, a golden calf,
hoping that maybe that will honor some other god
who might come to help them.
And Moses comes down the mountain
and sees the statue
and erupts in anger:
"What
are you doing?
Here I've been up the mountain
praying with God,
and God has sent you these laws, written in stone,
a sign of the relationship, the commitment,
he has to you,
and I discover this!
God rescued you from slavery!
God brought you safely out of Egypt!
God has feed you, and given you water, and led you
all this way,
and you just give up?
You just throw all that away?
You think God
is going to stand for that?"
And in his anger

he throws down the tablets
and they shatter,
and with them
that precious relationship,
going all the way back to Abraham,
that had made the Israelites
the people of God.

The people are done with God, or so they think,
but God isn't done with them.

Eventually, after anger
and fear and punishment,
the people began to realize
what they have done,
and are sorry.

And Moses,
Moses goes to God.
just one more chance?
Not for the people's sake, but for yours,
so that no one can say, this God
abandoned his people.

And God
responds.
Moses goes back up the mountain,
and sees God,
God, "the Lord,
a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,
keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin."
And God gives Moses the words of the commandments, the words of the covenant
again,
and he writes them on new tablets of stone,
and takes them back to the people,
because they might have abandoned God
but God does not

abandon
them.

That's the *hesed*,
the mercy, grace, love, kindness, and commitment
of God.

We heard another story of it in our Old testament reading.

The people are in the wilderness,
still on that long,
forty year journey
from slavery
to the land of promise.
And they begin to grumble.
Why did you bring us here?
Why not just leave us in Egypt?
We're sick of the food you give us.
Grumble, grumble, grumble.
And they camp
on a nest of poisonous snakes,
and people get bitten
and die,
and their leaders
panic.
What have we done?
And they go to Moses.
"We know we were grumbling;
we know we were making trouble;
we know
we we're not always good
at following God,
but please, please,
we know God listens to you.
Please ask God
to take the snakes away!"

And Moses prayed,
And God responded,
and the people were healed.

That's the *hesed*,
the mercy, grace, love, kindness, and commitment
of God.

And that pattern is repeated
time and time again.

God leads the people.
They get tired, fearful, disheartened, doubting,
and abandon God.
But God does not
abandon them.
And when they are ready,
when they are ready to turn back to God,
God is ready and waiting
and overflowing with *hesed*.

Doesn't that sound familiar?
God's *hesed*
didn't end
with the Old Testament.
God's *hesed*,
God's mercy, grace, love, kindness, and commitment
is exactly what we see
in Christ.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

God love us so much
that God gives us, time and time again,
the opportunity to return.
Even when we're struggling,
God doesn't abandon us.
Even when we're grumbling,
God doesn't abandon us.
Even when we lose faith
God doesn't abandon us.

But is waiting, arms open,

with mercy, and grace, and love, and kindness, and commitment,
waiting for us
to heal us
and save us.

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good,
and his mercy endures for ever.