

Sermon for Sunday, August 9, 2015
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
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This week
is the second time this summer
that we have read psalm 130. The last time
was the end of June;
we also read in
last year in Lent.

And it makes you wonder
why the people who put our lectionary together
felt it was so necessary
to read it so often,
when other psalms
like the one before it,
Psalm 129, don't get read at all.

I can't answer for them,
but what I have noticed
is that this is one of those psalms
that has become central in our tradition;
this is one of those psalms
that has more and more to say to us
every time we read it.

As I said six weeks ago,
each time we read this psalm,
or any passage of Scripture,
we read it differently
depending on when it comes in the year,
what traditions are associated with it,
what other parts of Scripture
we read it alongside,
and what has been happening
in the world around us.
Or to put it differently,
each time we read it

God has something distinctive,
perhaps even something new
to say to us.

That's why
in the letter to the Hebrews,
the word of God,
the scriptures
are described as living and active.
Not just words on a page,
but words through which
God speaks.

But back to the psalm.
Last time we read it,
I commented on the fact
that this psalm
has traditionally been read
as a penitential psalm,
one
that expresses our sadness
when we fail,
and gives us words
to confess our mistakes
to God.
That's why it's used during Lent.
And it's also why
the lectionary often pairs it with stories from the Old Testament
about people who struggle,
whose encounter with sin
leaves them in a place
of despair.

And so this week,
we see it paired
with the story of the death of David's son, Absalom,
a story of a son's rebellion,
and political maneuvering,
and betrayal, death, and grief.

Just as last time we read it,
it was paired with the story
of the death of Jonathan,
and David's grief
for him.

But the old Testament readings
aren't the only things
that shape how we read the psalm.
Our interpretation is also shaped
by the New Testament and Gospel readings,
even though the psalm isn't deliberately chosen to go with those.
And sometimes
those readings
draw attention to something in the psalm
that we might otherwise
have missed.

Which is good news
when you're reading the psalm for the second time within two months!

And it was our reading from the New Testament today,
and the one from last week that Diane preached about,
that drew my attention to something in our psalm.
It was in the last two verses.

O Israel, wait for the LORD,
for with the LORD there is mercy;

“With [the Lord] there is plenteous redemption,
and he shall redeem Israel from all their sins.”

The first five verses of our psalm
are the lament
of an individual,
someone who is in the depths of despair.

Out of the depths have I called to you, O LORD;
LORD, hear my voice;
let your ears consider well the voice of my supplication.

It's a conversation, if you like,
between one person
and God,
one person
who calls out to God.

But in the last two verses
it changes.
Suddenly
the psalmist isn't speaking to God,
but to the whole community.

What looks at first
like a declaration of hope
for individuals who are struggling
becomes a declaration of hope
for the whole community.

O Israel, wait for the LORD,
for with the LORD there is mercy;

With [the Lord] there is plenteous redemption,
and he shall redeem Israel from all their sins.

And it reminds us of the scope of God's work.
It's not just about individuals.
It's about everyone, together.

Of course, that shouldn't surprise us.
We know the stories of the Old Testament.
Time and time again we hear
of how God acts
to create a people, a nation,
that are sometimes known
as the people of God
and sometimes known
by the shorthand, Israel.
There is no separation of church and state here;
the political and the religious coincide.

And that kind of makes sense, when you think about the origins of this people.
All of them, at least by tradition, all of them
are descended from the twelve sons
of Jacob,
Jacob, son of Isaac, grandson of Abraham.
Abraham, Isaac, Jacob,
they have common ancestors:
everyone is kin.
Being part of Israel, part of the people of God
is something you are born into.
So Israel is not just
a political entity,
not just a religious one,
but also
a family.
everyone is kin;
everyone is connected.
And God is constantly leading them,
teaching them,
forgiving them.

And it is probably not too much to say
that at least in the Old Testament
while God works
through
individuals,
it's almost always
for the sake of the whole community.

Yes, the psalmist says,
God will hear my cries,
but more importantly,
God will hear our cries.
Forgiveness is not just for one person
but for all of us.

When you get to the New Testament,
it looks a little different.
Because now
the way you connect with God

is not simply by being born into the relationship.
It's by getting to know Jesus, and his story.
And so Jesus travels around
talking to people,
teaching them, healing them, calling them
to follow him.

And it's that last part
that is key.
Because what Jesus does
is form communities.
People respond to him one by one,
but as they do,
they become caught up in communities.
And so we hear about the twelve apostles,
and the women who travel with them,
and other people who follow him.

And then,
as the church as we know it is formed,
the same thing happens.
People hear the message of Jesus.
They respond.
And they become part of a community.

You see it on Pentecost.
After Peter's great sermon, about three thousand,
yes, three thousand,
were baptized.
And the way the second chapter of Acts tells it,
"All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their
possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as
they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food
with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people."

Later on, as the apostle Paul travelled throughout the Mediterranean,
when people heard the good news of Jesus Christ
and responded,
what typically happened
was that not just the person who heard

who was baptized,
but the whole household - that means the family members
and their servants and slaves.
Scripture doesn't imagine
that salvation
is something that happens to us alone.
It is always about
the whole community.

And that's why,
that's why
in the letter to the Ephesians
there is so much emphasis on the community.
That's what our reading last week reminded us, in those words that we recognize
from the beginning of our baptism service.
"There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling,
one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through
all and in all."
We are one body,
and Christ is the head, who holds us all together.

Or as today's reading put it,
we are members of one another.

We belong together,
and it is together
that we are saved.

That's such a contrast with our culture, isn't it?
We live in a culture
that is all about
the individual.
All about each of us
getting our needs met.

That's so different from the orientation of Scripture, the orientation of our faith.
It's all about
us all.
All together.

Which is why we have all that practical advice in our New Testament reading today,
about how to live together.

It's why we were reminded last week
that the gifts we are given
are not for our own benefit,
but for the benefit of all.

It's why the psalm moves
from forgiveness for the individual
to the salvation of the whole community.

And that's the gift
and the challenge
of being the church.

It's the gift
and the challenge
of being Christian.

Always looking
to what God is doing among us.

Always looking
for how we can serve God
in one another.

Always,
for the good of the whole
people of God.