

Sermon for Sunday, August 16, 2015
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
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A is for apple a,
B is for ball,
C is for cat,
D is for dog...

I suspect
you can guess the rest.

We all know them,
alphabet songs and books
designed to teach children
the alphabet.

But they also work
the other way round.
Using the alphabet
is a way of teaching other things.

So kids at school might be asked
to come up with a word that describes a person, place or thing for each letter of the
alphabet,
so that they learn about
adjectives.

And this is nothing new.
Way back, thousands of years ago when the psalms were being written,
they used the alphabet
as a way of making them
memorable.

You might remember
psalm one hundred nineteen,
which we read chunks of
last year.

One hundred seventy six verses in all, twenty two groups of eight verses.

It's a long psalm,
and in English,
it seems to say the same thing
over and over again.

But in Hebrew, the way it was originally written, you can 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.

Today's psalm
is a lot shorter
but it has
the same type of structure.
Although there are only ten verses,
after the opening
"Hallelujah!"
there are twenty two lines altogether,
the same number of lines
as there are letters in the Hebrew alphabet,
and in Hebrew
each of the lines
begins with a different letter.
And the focus of this psalm
is on the faithfulness,
the reliability,
of God.

And what does that faithfulness look like?

God's work

is full of majesty and splendor
God is gracious and full of compassion.
He gives food to those who fear him;
He remembers his covenant;
He has given the people their own land.
God's actions
are of faithfulness and justice;
his commands
are about truth and equity;
and God has sent
redemption to his people.

Can you hear the echoes rolling through the psalm?
Echoes of the stories that we know so well
from the Old Testament.
The creation of all things,
sun and moon,
earth and water,
plants and animals,
and everything that lives, us included.
A creation that time after time after time
God says
is good.

The calling of a people,
Abraham and Isaac and Jacob,
God's commitment to them
sealed with a covenant, a promise,
unconditional,
offering
land, descendants and blessing,

The Exodus,
the rescue of the people
from slavery in Egypt,
escaping across the Red Sea,
wandering in the desert,
God providing manna to eat
and water from a rock,
and on Mount Sinai

the gift of the law,
setting out
the best ways
for the people to live
in harmony with one another, with the land, and with God.

And then the psalm comes to a conclusion, with those well known words,
The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.

And we begin to see
that all this faithfulness of God,
all this
calls for a response.
And the response is fear of the Lord.

This
is one of those places
where our English translation
doesn't quite capture
the meaning of the original words of Scripture.
Because when we hear the word fear
we think first and foremost
of something scary, of being afraid.
And the Hebrew word for fear
does mean that.
But that's only part of its meaning.
It also means
to respect and to reverence.

So how do we tell
which meaning belongs here?

The best way
is by looking at the context.
This whole psalm
has been about the faithfulness,
the generosity,
the goodness
of God.
God, in this picture,

is not someone to be afraid of.
 But God is someone
 to respect, to reverence, to thank.

And that takes us back to the beginning of the psalm:
 I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart,
 in the assembly of the upright, in the congregation.

Fearing God,
 respecting, revering God
 is expressed
 in worship.
 Coming together
 with the congregation of the faithful
 to give thanks.

That's the end of the psalm.
 But it's not the end
 of the conversation.

Because Psalm 111 is, nor surprisingly, followed by Psalm 112.
 And while there is often no logical connection between psalms that follow one another,
 the connection between these two psalms
 is pretty clear.

For a start, Psalm 112
 is structured in exactly the same way.
 After the opening
 "Hallelujah!"
 there are twenty two lines,
 each beginning
 with a different letter of the alphabet.

But it's not only the structure.
 It's the content as well.
 You remember that Psalm 111
 ends like this:

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;
 those who act accordingly have a good understanding;
 his praise endures for ever.

Psalm 112
begins like this.

Happy are they who fear the Lord *
and have great delight in his commandments!

If Psalm 111
is fundamentally about the faithfulness of God,
Psalm 112
is all about our human response.

Because the faithfulness of God to us
calls us not only to respect and reverence God,
to worship,
but to live lives
that are faithful.

So what does that look like?

The way the psalm answers
is this:
to be merciful and full of compassion
to be generous in lending
to manage your affairs with justice
to give freely to the poor

It's about having a right heart,
one that echoes the heart of God.

So when you put the two psalms together,
God is faithful
and we're called to live faithfully in response,
in two ways:

by our worship
and by the compassion of our lives,
compassion that includes
justice
and mercy
and generosity.

You can't do one
without the other.
Worship alone
is not enough.
Living compassionately
is not enough.
Both.
Being faithful to God
is supposed to make
a difference.
Not just in what we do on Sundays,
but in what we do every day.

So, you might be thinking,
that's all very well,
but where does Jesus come into it?

Remember what Jesus said
when he was asked what was the greatest commandment?
You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all
your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You
shall love your neighbour as yourself."

Worshipping God.
Living faithfully.

And we see it echoed in our Epistle today.

"Be careful how you live" is how our reading began.
And if you remember back to last week, you'll know
that this whole chapter begins with the words,

"Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us
and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."

Be imitators of God, imitating God's faithfulness,
God's mercy, God's generosity.
In the way you live.
In the way you worship.

“So do not be foolish,” writes the apostle Paul,
“but understand what the will of the Lord is. Do not get drunk with wine, for that is
debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual
songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving
thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus
Christ.”

And the end of our epistle
brings us back again
to our psalm.

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;
those who act accordingly have a good understanding;
his praise endures for ever.

I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart,
in the assembly of the upright, in the congregation.”