

Pentecost 15, Proper 20, Year A, 2014
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
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There are some psalms
that we all know by heart
or at least ones
that we immediately recognize. Psalm 23,
“The Lord is my shepherd”,
Psalm 139,
“Lord you have searched me out and known me,”
Psalm 46,
“God is our strength and refuge,”
Psalm 1,
“Blessed is the man who does not walk with the ungodly,” Psalm 84,
“How lovely is your dwelling place,”
and I’m sure you could add
many others.
And after this summer,
we should all be able to add Psalm 105 to the list.
“Give thanks to the LORD and call upon his Name.”
Today is, I think, the fourth time we’ve read it this year, the fourth time
that we’ve heard the call from the first six verses
to give thanks,
to search for God,
to remember all that God has done.
And each time we’ve read it,
we’ve added a few more verses to the story, the list of things
that God has done:
the covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,
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the unexpected turnaround of Joseph, the battle with Pharaoh and the plagues, the escape from
slavery in Egypt,
the crossing of the Red Sea,
until finally today
we hear about the journey through the wilderness and into the promised land.
It wasn’t an easy journey.
You would have thought
once the people crossed the Red Sea,
that it would be a simple matter,
turning north east along the trade routes following the coast of the Mediterranean directly back
to the promised land.

But no,
they took a different route.
Instead of heading north east
they went south east,
down the eastern shore of the Gulf of Suez and then back north
along the western shore
of the Gulf of Aqaba, a very
very
long way round.
Perhaps they were afraid that a well travelled route would make it easier
for Pharaoh's army
to come after
them.
Perhaps they were afraid
of bandits
waiting to attack wealthy traders
and as refugees
they had not way to defend themselves. Or perhaps
it was simply easier
to follow the pillar of fire at night
and the pillar of cloud by day
that were the presence of God
leading them.
We have no idea.
But it wasn't long
before they began complaining,
continuing the tradition they had begun at the Red Sea, when they accused Moses
of leading them from slavery
to death.
We're hungry.
We're thirsty.
We're lost.
We're dying.
And then Moses says to them,
"Okay, so first God saves you from slavery.
Then he rescues you from Pharaoh's army
by making dry land through the middle of the water. Now,
we've got clouds and fire leading us every day. What, do you think God would have done all this
just for you to die you here?
You gotta be joking"
And God would have every right
to abandon them there in the desert. Talk about ungrateful.
But instead,

instead

God sends quail and manna, meat and bread,
so that their hunger
is satisfied,
and God brings water from a rock
and their thirst is sated. Not just once
but day
after day
after day.

And eventually, eventually the people did make it to the promised land.
It took a while.

Because the first time they got close, right at the border,
they sent some people ahead, spies, to find a safe route
and those spies reported back that there was no safe way. All except Joshua
and Caleb.

Really?

You think God would have brought them all this way for nothing?

So they went back into the wilderness years and years more wandering, years and years more
of taking the long way round,
until finally God brought them into the promised land.

“Give thanks to the LORD and call upon his Name” begins this psalm.

And it ends,

“That [God’s people] might keep his statutes
and observe his laws. Hallelujah

You see,

there’s a point to this psalm.

It’s not merely a recitation
of all that God has done for the people,
nor even an invitation to give thanks.

It’s a call to the people
to live

as the people of God,
to live in the way that God has created them to live, to live
obediently.

Because in the past,
obedience has gone well for them.

All the way through the stories of the people of God, the people’s obedience
has been the vehicle
of God’s blessing.

It was Abraham
who obeyed God’s call
and left his homeland

for the promised land.

It was Joseph
who forgave his brothers
and saved them from famine.

It was Moses
who even though he really didn't think he was a leader led the people from slavery

to freedom.

All of them obedient to God, and their obedience
making it possible
for God to bless them.

And so the psalm says,
remember how God's people have been blessed when they have been obedient?

Pay attention
to what God asks of you.

So where does that take us?

We live thousands of years later,
and in between

Christ has come.

How does this link between obedience and blessing work for us?

Obedience isn't something that we talk about a lot at church. We tend to focus on grace,
the incredible goodness of God
in giving us more than we could ever earn,
more than we could ever deserve.

We focus on the idea that when Christ came he freed us from the demands of the law. And all
that

is true.

But it's not the whole truth.

Yes, Christ came and lived and died and rose for us,
and that has given us salvation and healing and wholeness, the knowledge that we are known and
loved by God

and that we can know and love God
in return.

All that
is a gift from God.

But all that doesn't mean that we just go on doing what we have always done.

In the letter to the Romans,
the apostle Paul tries to make sense of all this.

In chapter 5, he begins,

"Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through
whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand."

He then talks about sin coming through Adam, and grace through Jesus Christ, and says, “just as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous.”

We are made righteous by Christ’s obedience. That’s how we receive God’s grace.

But then comes the logical question.

So, surely if we sin more, then Christ’s obedience means more, and there will be more grace?

And Paul’s response is clear.

Absolutely no

It is not our obedience that wins us grace, wins us salvation, but in Christ we are raised,

in Christ

we are given new life, in Christ

we join him in his life and that life

We are called

to a life of obedience

to God, not to win God’s blessing but because we have been blessed.

is a life of obedience to God.

And what does that obedience look like?

We all know Jesus words about the greatest commandments:

“To love God with all our hearts and minds and souls and strength; and to love our neighbors as ourselves.”

But for most of us

that’s kind of nebulous.

That’s why later in his letter

Paul explains Christian life, Christian obedience

in more detail,

in the words we have been using as part of our final blessing the last few months.

Let love be genuine.

Don’t fake it.

Pray that God’s love will fill you.

Hate what is evil.

When you see something wrong, don’t just pretend it isn’t there. Do something about it.

Do something

to bring good.

Love one another with mutual affection.

This isn’t just about marriage, or families;

this is a letter written to a church.

Love one another. Everyone.

And one way of doing that is to show honor.

Speak about the good things you see people here doing. Don’t undermine them. Honor them.

Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.

Share your blessings, and give thanks for them. Learn to wait on God when things are tough,

knowing that God is
faithful. Keep
praying.

Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.

God has given you gifts. Use them - in whatever way you can. No one is too young
or too old
to serve God.

Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Be generous. With your money. Tithing, giving ten percent of your income to God
was the norm in biblical times. Think what amazing things God could do here if everyone gave
ten percent of their income - knowing that if they were in need
others in the community
would come to their help.

Be hospitable. Welcome those who you don't know. One of the things that makes the church
different than many other organizations is that everyone is welcome. Everyone. Make sure
we offer that welcome.

And all that
is just a beginning.

Paul goes on in Romans, and in his other letters,
with wise advice
about living obediently,

or as he puts it at the beginning of his letter to the Philippians, living our lives in a manner
worthy of the gospel of Christ.

Because God is faithful.

We remember that each week as we say the Creed - we remember the ways that God has blessed
us.

Remember what God has done for you. Give thanks.

And pay attention
to what God asks of you.