

Sermon for Sunday, June 28, 2015
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
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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.
If you, LORD, were to note what is done amiss,
O Lord, who could stand?
For there is forgiveness with you;
therefore you shall be feared.

So begins
our psalm today,
a psalm
that we have heard before.
We last read it
in Lent last year;
we will read it again
before the summer is out.

And each time we read it
it sounds different,
each time
different things call out for our attention.
Each time we read this
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, I suspect,
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.
One of the things
that has shaped the way this psalm
has been traditionally read
is that back in the sixth century,
a Roman statesman, writer, and Christian educator,
Cassiodorus,
identified it as one of seven penitential psalms.
Over the following centuries,
these psalms
began to be used as a focus of prayer
during Lent,
as people prepared for Easter
with a season
of penitence.

And what that means,
is that for much of its history,
Psalm 130 has, effectively,
been used as a form of confession,
a way of admitting sin
before God
and pleading
for forgiveness.
And it does a good job of that.

But as I read our psalm during the week, I wondered
if that is all
that this psalm
has to say to us,
or more properly,

I wondered if there is more that God has to say to us through this psalm.

I wonder
if the focus on confession
has caused us to miss
something else
that is really important.

What if
the most important verse is not the first one,
“Out of the depths have I called to you, O LORD,”
what if it is not that, but
the second verse:
“If you, LORD, were to note what is done amiss,
O Lord, who could stand?”

“If you, LORD, were to note what is done amiss,
O Lord, who could stand?”

In other words,
if God were to pay any attention
to what we have done
we would have no right,
no possibility
of standing before God,
of calling out,
of seeking God
in prayer
or anywhere else.

And isn't that a theme that we see
woven throughout scripture?
The people of God
wandering in the wilderness for forty years
because of their stubbornness and rebellion.

Isaiah
seeing a vision of God
in all God's holiness,
cringing

in fear.

Jonah,
angry at God
for being merciful to the people of Ninevah
who he thinks
deserve to be destroyed.

And Zechariah and Mary and the shepherds,
all of them terrified
when the angel of the Lord
first appears to them.

But,
but, says our psalm,
with the Lord
there is mercy,
with the Lord
there is redemption,
with the Lord
there is grace.

Grace.
Grace allows us
to be in relationship with God,
grace allows us
to speak with God,
grace allows us
to pray.

And that's not something
we can take
for granted.

We live in a world
where the usual assumption
is that you get what you deserve.
But on Christ
that assumption
is made null and void.

You can't earn
grace.
It's the free gift
of God.

And that grace,
although the psalm only prefigures it,
that grace comes
in Jesus Christ.

Remember that quote I read from the letter to the Hebrews?
It continues this way.

Since...we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God...let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Grace, the grace of Jesus Christ,
allows us
to approach God
without fear.

It reminds me of the prayer of humble access
which is optional in Rite one before communion.

Every so often, I hear people say
that they don't like it
because it's too depressing. It focusses on our sin, they say, and we are people of the resurrection.

But I've always read it
as a prayer that is fundamentally about grace.

We do not presume to come to your table, merciful Lord,
trusting in our own righteousness,
but in your manifold and great mercies.
We are not worthy
so much as to gather up the crumbs under your table.
But you are the same Lord

whose nature is always to have mercy.
 Grant us, therefore gracious Lord,
 so to eat the flesh of your dear Son Jesus Christ,
 and to drink his blood,
 that we may evermore dwell in him,
 and he is us. Amen.

And you remember the story behind it,
 the story of Jesus
 and the Syrophenician woman.
 It's a story we'll read again
 on Labor Day weekend.

But since I suspect
 many of us may be away then, let me pre-empt that Sunday
 and read it to you, from the gospel according to St Mark, chapter 7.

Jesus set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go-- the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone.

It's a troubling story. We're not sure we want a Jesus
 who would even consider
 turning someone away.
 Especially when she is asking
 for help for our child.
 But we have to remember the context.

This woman
 is of Syrophenician origin.
 In other words,
 she's descended
 most likely
 from Persian rulers,

and from the remnant of the Canaanites who the people of God pushed out when they claimed the promised land.

Not a follower
of God in the Jewish tradition
Gentile.

One who doesn't belong - doesn't belong to the Jewish people,
doesn't belong
in the land.

And Jesus
has a plan.
Jesus
has a program.
He's going first
to the people of God,
the Jews,
giving them an opportunity
to know more deeply
the God they have always followed.

It makes sense.
He has something to build on.
But this woman, this woman
as far as we know
doesn't know anything about the God of the Jews.
She has no history with God,
no practice of prayer,
nothing
to recommend her
to Jesus.
But she has a daughter, and her daughter is sick,
and she is desperate.

And so she comes to Jesus. "Help my daughter, please,
help her!"
"What right have you to ask?" says Jesus,
and turns his back.

"None,"
she says.

“None, at all. But please, please,
not because I’ve any right to it,
but because you might perhaps
have just enough grace left over for me,
please
hep my daughter.”

And Jesus
can’t help
but say yes.
Her daughter is healed.

Jesus’ words might seem ungracious,
but his actions
are full of grace.

Grace is not earned.
Grace is not merited.
Grace is not
something we deserve.
But God, in Christ, offers it to us anyway.

And we respond
with grace.
I have seen grace this week
as eight parishioners joined with me
in a church to overflowing
to remember those nine people of grace
who were killed in Charleston.
There was grace
as we heard the cousins of DePayne Middleton Doctor
speak
not with hatred
but with love.
there was grace
when Istvan
chose in advance the hymn we sang last week
“God is love”
not knowing
what was going to happen

in Charleston.

There was grace
when I invited parishioners to help sponsor kids from St Paul's Flatbush
to go to Camp DeWolfe,
and we received commitments
of over \$900.

There was grace
as their rector
began to explore with me
the possibility of a sister church relationship.

There was grace
in a President
who, whether you agree with his politics or not,
was able to put flesh on the words,
"In God we trust"
and speak of the amazing grace of God.

There was grace
when our General Convention elected
a new Presiding Bishop
on the first ballot
with a huge majority.

Grace
upon
grace upon grace.

O Israel, wait for the LORD, *
for with the LORD there is mercy;
with the Lord
there is grace.