

Sunday, October 23, 2022

The Mercy of God

By Intern Pastor Jory Mickelson

Good morning. Good morning! I am happy to be with you all the way through Christmas now. Today's passages all seem quite different from one another. Sometimes when I come to church and hear the readings, I don't know what to do with them. They seem like a handful of jigsaw puzzle pieces and I am not even sure they are all to the same puzzle! Seriously!

Today we a passage from the book of Jerimiah where the prophet is praying to God for much-needed rain in a drought. In Psalm 84, we have a worship song praising God's holy temple in Jerusalem. In 2nd Timothy, Paul is writing a letter to Timothy using sports metaphors—a race—to talk about God's faithfulness. And finally, we have Jesus telling his disciples a parable about prayer at the temple. Does someone have the box these puzzle pieces came in? I am going to need to see the picture!

Maybe that is what you are hoping my sermon will do for you today—show you the picture on the puzzle box. Skillfully weave together all of the scripture into a comforting picture, maybe a mountain landscape, or a nostalgic farm scene in afternoon sunshine. Something to make us feel comfort, feel a little closer to God, a little better about our faith. Some preachers are like that. But preachers sometimes struggle to bring the Scriptures together. We scratch their heads, maybe get a little irate and mumble a prayer like, “Fine God, you better send your Spirit to write this thing because I certainly can't!” Maybe our lives can feel a little like this too. We say to God, in whatever voice we think is most likely to get God's attention, “Hey, get over here! You need to figure this out!”

God does need to figure it out. Most of the time, I come to the end of my best efforts and don't have a great deal to show for it in a difficult situation. You find yourself in a hard spot, and don't see any way out. We come to the end of our own strength and ability, the end of our own energy and cleverness, and then what? Where is God? Why is this so hard?

Jerimiah needs it to rain. The singer of the Psalm needs a safe place to go in trouble. Paul is nearing the end of his life and is anticipating God's promise of eternal salvation. The people in the parable today enter the temple to pray. They are all longing for God. They all need something that they are unable to make, buy, or wheel and deal for on their own. They've come to the end of their own best efforts and come up short.

What do we call that? What do we call it when we try to force a situation that just won't come together? A struggle where we may have stepped on the toes of other people to get where we wanted to be? Where we ignore, sidestep, and avoid anything that distracts us from our goal? Well, traditionally, especially if you are a man, you would be praised for this kind of behavior in our culture. We would this winning. We call it coming out on top. Who cares about the consequences, we say, we won. That is what matters? Right?

But if we aren't the winners in these situations, our behavior isn't so easy to cover up or excuse. We can't easily explain away all the things we did to get where we were trying to go. The

Israelites needed rain so they turned to asking foreign deities. If it had worked, I doubt we would have this passage from Jerimiah at all. But the rain didn't come despite praying to other gods, so the Israelites were left to look at and admit their failures coming before the Holy One. What does the passage from Jerimiah call this impatient, willful behavior, where the Israelites tried to make it rain no matter the cost? Sin.

In Jerimiah 14:7 it says, "our apostasies indeed are many, and we have sinned against you." Now if you want to do a little digging here, and look at the Hebrew, we find the word 'chata' (kha-tahw) which means to miss, to go wrong. Some of you may have heard that sin is like an arrow not quite hitting the target. The arrow literally, misses its mark. I like this definition and I don't. It makes it sound instead of us forcing the situation, of doing whatever it takes to get what we want, we are just bad at archery. That if we refine our skills a little, that next time, we indeed will be the winners and be praised, and everything we did to get there won't matter.

Another definition or translation of the word chata is bewildered. How I know this feeling! I get hyper-focused on wanting something or pursuing some goal and when I crash and burn, I come back to myself thinking, "how the heck (though I didn't say heck), how the heck did I get here?" Our self-will, our struggle to make things work, and our desire for what we don't currently have. They bewilder us. Our sins pile up around us until we are up to our necks, unable to avoid them. We are confused how things could have gotten so bad when we had all the best intentions.

One final translation of chata is to bear the loss or to bear the blame. This is clearly what Israelites are doing when they turn back to God. This is us when we have to face the costs of our actions, the relationships damaged or broken, our hurting hearts, how we can't bear to look at ourselves in a mirror because we know exactly what we have been up to. We carry around the guilt and the shame with us, literally bearing them along with us day and night.

We have sinned against God, but also against other people—perhaps our coworkers or neighbors, our friends and family, perhaps our spouses. We have also sinned against ourselves. We have sinned against the new creature we have become in Christ at our baptism. Maybe sinning against ourselves is the hardest to bear. The heaviest to carry. We might feel like we can never tell anyone. That if we do, we will face rejection and total loss. Be cast out. We vow to take these sins to our graves. We say, they never happened, even though in our hearts we know they have. I feel hopeless. You feel despair. We sometimes don't know how we can go on.

But all of the passages today don't just talk about sin, they also talk about hope. They talk about a longing for God. A longing to be restored, for the nourishing waters to come, for a safe place in which to rest. A shelter for us in our distress.

Psalms 84:2 "My soul has a desire and longing for the courts of the Lord." The lowly tax collector in Jesus' parable says in Luke 18:13, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" Jerimiah declares, "We set our hope on you, for it is you who do all this."

In our missing the mark, in our bewilderment, in our deep sorrow and grief we call upon God. In our heavy guilt, or seemingly hopeless shame, in what feels like unending despair we cry out to the Merciful One to show us mercy.

This is why each week we begin our service with both a Confession and Forgiveness. We confess our failings and receive forgiveness for them. In the actual text of the prayer we recite together, we begin “God of mercy and forgiveness.” We name the qualities of God as a reminder to us, but also as a reminder the Holy One that they are merciful, that they are indeed forgiving. That we seek to see and know the merciful and forgiving face of a God who loves us.

We then admit, “we confess that sin still has a hold on us” and we list some general ways that it does, that we “have harmed God’s good creation, that we have failed to be just, failed at being loving and kind, failed at being right-sized.” And maybe in our hearts we add a few specific things, like how many people we honked at on the way to church or how many times we yelled at the television this week.

We have lost our way, we are bewildered on the path of life, so we then ask God to “Turn us in a new direction, to show us the path that leads to life.” Give us better aim Loving One, set us on the way that leads toward safety, happiness, and hope. Give us a new life, a better life than where we find ourselves in this moment.

And finally, we confess that we are not God. That we can no longer be our own refuge, we can’t be our own strength. We discover we need the Mighty One to be those things for us. That it isn’t up to us to run the show. So we can keep our eyes on the path and trust, little by little, that God’s got us. That we are loved, held, and helped by an infinite source of life, love, and mercy. That it is God who will win in the end, not us. That it is God and not us. That it is our God who saves. Even us. Even if we wander from the path. More than once. More than a little bit off the mark.

We find that this was the picture on the puzzle box the whole time. That little by little, the pieces do come together. With practice, the picture reveals itself, becomes clearer. That is it God who does the work in us, with us, and through us—rather than we who have to do it alone. And that the more we lean into that help, that hope, the more quickly we will begin to see the image that hid itself from us for so long. Which is the face of a loving and merciful God who has been with us from before the beginning and who will be with us all the way to the end.

This is the Good News that I have heard this week and bring to you this morning.