

Scripture Readings

Psalm 123—A Song of Ascent

To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens!
As the eyes of servants look to the hand of the one they serve--
as the eyes of attendants look to the head of the household--
so our eyes look to you, YHWH until you show us your mercy.
Have mercy upon us, O LORD, have mercy upon us;
for we have endured so much contempt,
endured far too much scorn from those who are at ease.

- a combination of the NRSV and The Inclusive Bible

Judges 4:1-10

The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD. So the LORD sold them into the hand of King Jabin of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor; the commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-ha-goiim. Then the Israelites cried out to the LORD for help; for he had nine hundred chariots of iron, and had oppressed the Israelites cruelly for twenty years.

At that time Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel. She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites came up to her for judgement. She sent and summoned Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him, 'The LORD, the God of Israel, commands you, "Go, take position at Mount Tabor, bringing ten thousand from the tribe of Naphtali and the tribe of Zebulun. I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin's army, to meet you by the Wadi Kishon with his chariots and his troops; and I will give him into your hand."' ' Barak said to her, 'If you will go with me, I will go; but if you will not go with me, I will not go.' And she said, 'I will surely go with you; nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman.' Then Deborah got up and went with Barak to Kedesh. Barak summoned Zebulun and Naphtali to Kedesh; and ten thousand warriors went up behind him; and Deborah went up with him.

Psalm 123; Judges 4:1-10

I begin this sermon with a thematic observation regarding the scripture texts we have for today. There is a sense of movement in each of them. In the Judges' passage Deborah is willing to accompany Barak (whose name literally translated means blessing) into serious conflict—the prophetess walks with blessing and the children of Israel into difficult places, we might say. In the Matthew passage, which we didn't read today, we have a parable of a wealthy person who goes on a journey and commissions the underlings to run the business while s/he is away, and the busy entrepreneurs move funds and investments at various rates of return—kingdom resources flow out and the resources flow in. This parable, it should be noted, comes just before the “Sheep & Goats” illustration in which mercy is described as a central trait of discerning disciples. And, finally, we have Psalm 123, which is located within the “songs of ascent” in the Psalter.

Psalms 120-134 all have a title in the Hebrew text which is translated by the RSV as **A Song of Ascents**...The collection is also called “The Book of Pilgrim Songs.” The Hebrew word translated **Ascents** comes from the verb “to go up,” but other than this there is no agreement as to what the phrase means”. Scholars [of this stuff] widely speculate upon the meaning of this title applied to those Psalms, but “the majority take it to refer to ascent up the mountain on which the Temple was built...Thus understood, these psalms are songs which the pilgrims sang as they came to Jerusalem for one of the three major annual festivals.¹

I would only add a couple of observations on Psalm 123 which enrich this pilgrimage theme. First, Psalm 123 is categorized as a communal lament (note the uses of “we” and “our”).² Psalm 123 suggests that when we grieve we all summoned to grieve together, and grief is a process. Secondly, in line with this textual observation the Jewish liturgy has included Psalm 123 in the Sabbath afternoon service during the winter months.³ I was certainly pleading for mercy Monday morning of this week as cleared banks of snow on the property for hours on end. Indeed, pleading for mercy as we seek to survive winter seems a part of the journey since early on. Finally, within the Benedictine tradition of the Middle Ages Psalm 123 was incorporated into the Tuesday readings during a season of vigil (think here of Advent, Lent, or watching over a dying loved one).⁴ Petitions

¹ Robert Bratcher and William Reayburn, *A Handbook on Psalm--* part of the United Bible Society **Handbook Series** (New York: United Bible Society, 1991), p. 1047.

² Bernhard Anderson, *Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for Us Today* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983), p. 242.

³ William Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years: Prayerbook of a Cloud of Witnesses* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 145

⁴ Ibid, 176.

for mercy as we prepare to meet God again is a part of our spiritual journey in Advent. And, again, we do this collectively.

Enough with the Biblical studies, for today. I share these Biblical and historical nuances with you, beloved congregation, because I think they are important. If it is torment, it is not meant to be so. It provides us a window as to why I will now share three narratives of mercy filled journeys. I begin with an account that resurfaced for me as I tussled with this topic.

Several weeks back I spoke about the experience of Germany was really important for me to actually learn a bit of the German language. Well, in those early months my German education my brother and first cousin came to visit me and we traveled a bit together. We climbed off the train in München after dark; we had reservations in a guest hostel not far from the bahnhoff. We were tired, stinky, and hungry—in poor form to navigate the city. We stood together looking at a kiosk with a city center map trying to find the location of our traveler’s hostile. An older gentleman in bedraggled clothes with a Vern Ratzlaff looking beard approached us. He said something in bayerisch, which is a dialect of German even most Germans don’t understand. He wanted us to follow him. My kin looked at me as if I knew what was said or intended. I had no idea what to do. In a split moment I suggested we should follow him. He led us to our hostel; the very placed we had reserved spots. I don’t know how or why, but he did. God have mercy. Christ have mercy. Jesus have mercy on weary travelers. Particularly, O God, continue to have mercy upon us those moving from city to city and country to country and task to task. Help us remember that you remember those on the go.

The title of Anne Lamott’s book *Traveling Mercies* also came to mind while sitting with this Sunday’s scriptures and sermon. The book is very personal and chronicles a journey of faith with which some of us can relate. I share parts of her introductory chapter.

My coming to faith did not start with a leap but rather a series of staggers from what seemed like one safe place to another. Like lily pads, round and green, these places summoned and then held me up while I grew. Each prepared me for the next leaf on which I would land, and in this way I moved across the swamp of doubt and fear. When I look back at some of these early resting places—the boisterous home of the Catholics, the safe armchair of the Christian Science mom, adoption by ardent Jews—I can see how flimsy and indirect a path they made. Yet each step brought me closer to the verdant pad of faith on which I somehow stay afloat today.⁵

⁵ Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), p. 3.

Mercy. Mercy is God's abiding presence with us as we stagger from lily pad to lily pad. Mercy is God's abiding presence with us we are drawn from lily pad to lily pad. Mercy is Emmanuel--- God with us. And this applies to us as individuals as well as to us as a community. In a wonderfully strange way the pilgrimage of individuals is linked with the pilgrimage of a community.

In this respect I would recommend a movie for your viewing pleasure in this snowy season. It is entitled "The Way"—produced and written by Emilio Estevez and starring Martin Sheen—and describes the way in which individual pilgrimage is linked to a communal journey. We are in this together, friends. I have a copy of the video at home and I am sure Netflix also has it in their catalogue. We are in it together. Mercy is God finding us where we are and leading us on. Mercy is that we are not alone in that migration.

My final story for the morning is that of Catherine de Hueck Doherty. Catherine was born to a Catholic Christian father and an Orthodox Christian mother. She married a Russian baron in the early 20th century. Things went well—until the First World War and the Russian Revolution and a hasty to transition from Russia to Finland to Canada. After working low end jobs for a number of years, Catherine became quite a celebrity in North America itinerating as a lecturer on her experiences. She became wealthy. She had all that Communism had taken away from her, and still her marriage fell apart. She had nagging ideas that Christian values, actually lived, might have averted the Communist Revolution and likely the woes of her domestic life. At the peak of her success she decided to give away much of her wealth in an effort to create centers of health and healing in communities throughout North America. Her Friendship House in Harlem, New York, established in 1937, was her Christian response to the racism she was witnessing in the States. "She had come to feel that the sin of racial prejudice and the consequent segregation of whites and blacks was [one of] the greatest countersign[s] to the gospel." Friendship House became sign of interracial justice and reconciliation. I conclude Catherine's story with two quotes: the first by her and the second by Thomas Merton who reflected on his time with Catherine.

"The hunger for God can only be satisfied by a love that is face to face, person to person. It is only in the eyes of another that we can find the Icon of Christ. We must make the other person aware we love [them]. If we do, [they] will know that God loves [them]. [They] will never hunger again.

From Thomas Merton:

Catholics are worried about Communism: and they have a right to be...But few Catholics stop to think the Communism would make very little progress in the world, or none at all, if Catholics really lived up to their obligations, and really did the things Christ came on earth to teach them to

do: that is, if they really loved one another, saw Christ in one another, and lived as saints, and did something to win justice for the poor.⁶

Profound words from both de Hueck and Merton. On to application.....

First, let us be merciful towards ourselves. Like Anne Lamott we are on a journey, and rarely is any journey straight forward or without incident. Psalm 123 holds out hope that God will show mercy. If we trust that God can be merciful with the likes of you, me, and us, then ought we not be merciful to ourselves? And maybe as we rest into this Divine mercy, we will find the capacity to extend mercy to those closest to us and those on the road with us. This takes me to my 2nd point.

The story of Deborah and Bark suggests that God's people will face challenges together. It is shaping up to be a snowy, COVID-19 riddled, and potentially lonely winter. Sometimes the prospective future is hard to face, and we need a Deborah like presence to go with us. I was touched by one retired woman of our congregation I visited recently who said she has made it her assignment to once a day call someone whom she would not typically telephone. Why? To ease the loneliness of another, perhaps; but maybe also equally likely to ease the isolation she experiences. Acts of mercy tend to grace both those who give and those who receive. We are invited to extend mercy towards our spiritual communities—we are on this road together.

Finally, Catherine de Hueck's story highlights that Divine mercy in its fullest form radiates through an individual into a spiritual community over-flowing into our world filling the cracks which plague our society. Those suffering on the margins, too, reveal the face of God. The work of MCC is grand, and Eileen did a wonderful job of again sharing the MCC story with us. Organizations like the Crisis Nursery (note the bulletin announcement and the box at the back), Egadz, the Lighthouse, and so many others benefit from our contributions and presence (if so allowed in these days). Even if all we can do is warmly greet a stranger or thank the bus driver or help dig out a snowed in vehicle, let us do generously.

I conclude this sermon with a short scripture verse given by Jesus to his community in the early stages of their journey: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy". Amen.

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⁶ Robert Ellsberg, *All Saints: Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses for Our Time* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997), pp. 352-353.

Benediction—HWB #724 (adapted)

Lord God, in whom we find life, health, and strength,
through whose gifts we are clothed and fed,
through whose mercy we have been forgiven and cleansed,
bless us as Guide, Strength, Savior, and Lord—all the days of our lives.
Amen.