

THANKSGIVING FOR GOD'S MERCY

Psalm 107:1-3, 23-32

Mark 4:35-41

June 23, 2024

Psalm 107 is a beautiful, poetic song of thanksgiving. Look at your insert and read the first two verses of it again with me:

- 1 - Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, and his mercy endures for ever.
- 2 - Let all those whom the Lord has redeemed proclaim that he redeemed them from the hand of the foe.

In those two verses we read a strong statement of faith of all believers about the nature of God and the nature of man—the nature of God is summed up in the one word *hesed*; the nature of man is to be a finite human being and essentially needy. It may not be hard to proclaim the former. It may be nearly impossible to confess the latter.

We are immersed in a culture of self-sufficiency—a people of good works ... I can do it by myself ... and I deserve credit for all I do. In a sermon I read by J. Clinton McCann, Jr., he quotes Isaac Bashevis Singer, who puts it this way: “I only pray when I’m in trouble, but I’m in trouble all the time.” McCann goes on to say: “If we realize this, the faithful response is to live in dependence upon God and with gratitude for God’s unfailing love. ... Psalm 107 injects a challenging truth—that is, in the final analysis self-sufficiency is a terrible illusion. Our lives depend on God, a God who hears our cries and responds out of an abundance of *hesed*.”

Let’s look at Psalm 107 in more detail. It can be outlined in three sections. As we read, it begins with an affirmation of the nature of God as full of *hesed*, here translated as mercy—otherwise translated throughout the Bible as steadfast love, loving kindness, loyalty, favor, goodness, or devotion. For us Christians, of course, we are shown what *hesed* is by Jesus.

The second section is a quartet of vignettes, each one describing the human condition in four different ways:

- 1- some are wanderers lost in the desert (vs.4)
 - 2- some sit in darkness and deep gloom (vs. 10)
 - 3- some are fools and took to rebellious ways (vs. 17)
 - 4- some are sailors on a ship being tossed about in raging waters—only this fourth one is included in our lectionary for today, a ship being tossed about in raging waters.
- Each are situations from which those described are in need of deliverance. Pick your own with which to identify. The fourth, of course, is the very way Mark describes our human condition in today’s Gospel.

The third section of Psalm 107 is a song of thanksgiving for God’s *hesed*, which calms the storm or reaches out with a hand to deliver them from their condition.

By the way, the psalmist describes God's hesed or mercy in exactly the same way: "They cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress." (vs. 6, 13, 19, 28)

I've been wanting to preach a sermon about confession of sin. What a perfect backdrop for doing so! First let me share with you a journey I took this week looking into some of the historical documents of Anglicanism. I went to the 39 Articles of Religion. There I found article 35 to be a commendation of the Book of Homilies. These were sermons written in the 1600's and published as "required preaching" in all Anglican parishes. One of those sermons, the 19th, was titled "Of Repentance, and Of true Reconciliation unto God." I could go on for hours about what I read there. But I share only these couple of sentences, because it is germane to what I want to preach about confession: "For we do daily and hourly by our wickedness and stubborn disobedience, horribly fall away from God, thereby purchasing unto ourselves (if he should deal with us according to his justice) eternal damnation. So that no doctrine is so necessary in the Church of God, as is the doctrine of repentance and amendment of life."

Confession is, therefore, defined for me as our acknowledging our human condition. And our human condition is not just the sum total of our works—the actions we take or do not take—but about our very nature.

Using our Gospel narrative, our human condition is doing our business of fishing in an unpredictable or uncontrollable sea ... our condition is recognizing that we need Jesus in the boat with us all the time. That is what our prayer of confession is, an acknowledgement of our necessary relationship with God.

Confession is not saying: I'm so sorry ... forgive me ... I will try not to do this or that again and I promise to be better from now on.

Confession is saying: I admit that I live in a state of imperfection and know that my only option is to admit it and accept the grace that God offers unconditionally to those who accept it.

I'm thinking of the portrait of Jesus knocking on the door; I quote from Revelations: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him, and will dine with him, and he with me." (Rev. 3:20)

Is confession a prayer informing God of what I have done and promising not to do it again or haggling with God who might possibly be talked into forgiving me.

No ... confession is to walk in the light of Christ and to see clearly that our sins were forgiven all along.

I think that many see confession as walking up to the blackboard, writing down all my actions and inactions on the board, and asking God to clear them with his divine eraser.

Rather I like the image of the net hanging below the trapeze performers in the circus tent. You and I are the trapeze performers. We might be very good at it at times--or not at other times. But our safety net is always there.

Let's get back to the Gospel narrative. The storm is not to be regretted. The experience of danger is to be taken as an encounter with the mighty, wonder-working God. It is an acceptance of God's heseid where and whenever we encounter it. We often live in a state of fear—"Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" Jesus says, "Be still"—to the storm AND to the disciples in the boat: "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" The opposite of fear is faith. If you must insist on looking at the storm as representative of your short-comings, or your sins, Jesus says to you: "I know; but your sins are already forgiven."

The Psalm that has helped us today to understand all of this ends, as must we all, in a prayer of thanksgiving. In verse 30 we read: "Then were they glad because of the calm, and he brought them to the harbor they were bound for."

Join me in reading verse 31 in your insert; but let's substitute the word "us" for the word "them."

"Let us give thanks to the Lord for his mercy and the wonders he does for his children."

AMEN