

## Hidden Blessings

Sunday, March 27, 2022

Joshua 5:9-12

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Psalm 32

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

We've already come to the fourth Sunday in Lent. How are we doing? Lent is supposed to be a season where we slow ourselves down enough so that we can **pay more attention to the ways of God**. So even though we here at Prince of Peace Lutheran have added services to our calendars - in the Wednesday night soup suppers and services - that is done in the hopes that we'll **spend more time considering how God is at work in this world and in our lives**. **The ways of God can be easy to miss. They are often hidden. They are often strange - not the way we would do things..** Who, for instance, would think that might could be hidden in humility? Who would think that death could bring life?

Today we're going to look together at some of these hidden blessings.

In the Joshua text, the Israelites have finally come to the promised land, Canaan, after wandering for forty years in the wilderness. Who should be celebrated for making and completing such an arduous journey? Is it the Israelites - that they hung in there no matter what? Go back and reread the stories if you happen to think that.

Exodus 14 reminds us that **before** the Israelites had even crossed the Red Sea, when they saw the Egyptians coming after them they were terrified, and they began accusing Moses of bringing them out in the wilderness to die. Talk about losing faith! In fact throughout that forty year wandering, we find story after story of them complaining and moaning and doing things God had commanded them not to do.

In the first eight verses leading up to our text today, we're told that none of the men that started out on that journey were still alive, and they had all been circumcised men, the sign of being responsive to God's covenant. Now we find out that none of the males who had been born somewhere along the journey had been circumcised. How's that for being faithful? It's like, "You keep up your side of the bargain, God! And we may or may not have time for what we promised to do." If an Israelite family wanted to participate in the Passover meal, the males had to be circumcised. So just prior to our text, there is a mass circumcision of the Israelite men who had been born in the wilderness. And conveniently, it is done just prior to getting ready to celebrate the Passover meal in the Promised Land, at a place called Gikal, a word which in Hebrew meant "rolling away."

Someone looking at this story from the outside might have wondered if God was incapable of doing what He had promised to do, might have even wondered if God had abandoned the Israelites in the wilderness, given the amount of time wandering there. But now, as they're recommitting themselves and preparing to celebrate the Passover in the Promised Land, just roll that idea out of your head. Even when things look impossible or improbable, God fulfills God's promises. God doesn't give up! God makes a way. It reminds us of a story we're headed towards, of a rolling away of a stone in front of a tomb that had held death...

A hidden blessing, when we're dealing with God, things are not always as they seem...

A hidden blessing, God keeps God's promises, even though the timing and fulfillment are not what we would envision.

Turning to Psalm 32, we find the first two verses telling us something about the nature of sin and forgiveness. Sin is failing to hit a target one is aiming at (or should be aiming at.) The Hebrew picture for forgiveness is that of God carrying the transgressions, the sin that is too heavy for the sinner. It is God, as my Fuller professor - John Goldingay says, "accepting the cost of it in oneself and thus not letting it destroy the relationship....It involves covering a person's shortcomings so that the shortcomings do not appear on a record sheet." How blessed a person is to have a God who forgives sinners.

In verses 3-5 the psalmist gives a kind of personal testimony of a time of failure that resulted in a turning to God. He reminds us that the blessing of forgiveness comes to the transgressor when there is an open, honest acknowledgment of the reality of one's struggles. There is no room for deceit with other people or with God in this relationship.

The psalmist goes on to say that silence about sin, a concealment of it, affects the body in physical ways, causes it to suffer. Noise, the noise of a voice confessing, is a move towards the end of such suffering.

Picture confession like this: A person writes down on a slate all the ways they feel or think they've let God down. They turn the slate towards God and start reading the list. Then God, who knows the condition of their heart and their deepest desires, hears their repentant spirit and wipes their slate clean with an eraser. Clean!

It's almost as if a dance is occurring. The sinner won't be relieved until he or she turns to God, but there is also no relief without God turning to the person confessing. Sometimes God turns first - as in Isaiah 44 where God tells Israel that their transgressions have been swept away like a cloud, and their sins like mist. "Return to me, for I have redeemed you," God says. Other times we humans turn first - as in Jonah 3 where we're told that when God saw what the Ninevites did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it. Whichever way it happens, commitment to God opens one up to the commitment of God.

Verse 6 says, "Therefore, let all who are faithful offer prayer to you; at a time of distress, the rush of mighty waters shall not reach them." Great waters or mighty waters were a common Hebrew image for some terrible distress that was threatening to overwhelm a person.

In verse 8 there is a voice change. God is speaking, a reminder that prayer is a conversation with God. God promises personal instruction on the right ways to live, and also that God will keep an eye on the person praying.

Verses 9-11 reverts back to the psalmist's voice exhorting fellow worshippers, reminding them of the pains ahead for the faithless, but that commitment will surround the person who trusts in the Lord.

A hidden blessing in this psalm? Perhaps it is a reminder that the prayer of confession - which is the opposite of trying to hide our mistakes or ignore them - is healthy for our spiritual and physical lives.

In Paul's 2nd letter to the Corinthians, he talks a lot about reconciliation, making things good in a relationship again that has been broken by mistakes or deliberate sins. God has done this with us who accept what Christ has done for us. God's good relationship with us has been restored, because when he looks at us now, Christ's death and resurrection have absorbed all of our old history and have given us a new lease on life. New creation! Now its possible for us to be reconcilers too.

I love author Miroslav Volf's testimony about the reconciliation he witnessed in his family. He was only one year old when this tragedy occurred. His 5 y/o brother slipped through a gate in the courtyard of their apartment in Croatia, and went to a small military base two blocks from their house where he had earlier discovered some friendly soldiers.

One of the soldiers put him on a horse-drawn bread wagon for a ride. As they were passing through a gate, Miroslav's brother leaned sideways and his head got stuck between the door post and the wagon, while the horses kept going. He died on the way to the hospital. The family's beloved nanny, who should have been watching him, wasn't watching carefully enough. She didn't go looking for him.

Forty-seven years later, Miroslav pieced together the story and realized that his parents had chosen to forgive her, and had never blamed her in front of their children. They had chosen to let her remain the beloved nanny of the rest of their children until she died at the age of 91.

The pain of that loss lingered for years in his mother, but she testified that any bitterness and resentment against those responsible for her young boy's death was healed at the foot of the cross as she gazed on the Son - Jesus - who was killed, and as she reflected about the God who forgave.

His parents were also able to forgive and reconcile with the soldier responsible for their son's fatal ride. The soldier felt so terrible after the accident that he had had to be admitted to a hospital. Miroslav's father went to visit him, to offer comfort to the one whose carelessness had caused so much grief. He told the soldier that he and his wife forgave him. The father continued to visit the soldier after he was discharged from the army, even though the soldier was part of the communist regime, even though it meant a two-day trip for the father.

Their reason to forgive was simple. God forgave them, so they must also forgive. They would always say the Bible teaches us to forgive one another.

And as Miroslav reflected on why his parents' beliefs about forgiveness had held strong in the face of such a devastating experience, he had to link it to the community of faith that they had been a part of, where they had learned to pray, where they had listened to preaching about loving enemies, where they had shared regularly in the Lord's Supper, where they were encouraged over and over to trust in God's love and faithfulness, where they entrusted their children to God's care, where they mourned the dead in the hope of resurrection.

A hidden blessing here? New creation is not up to you or me. God is the Creator and will work new creation in our lives by the power of His Spirit, and very well may use the community of faith around us - poor and sinful though we be - to support that work.

Finally, in Luke's gospel for today we have that well-known parable of the prodigal son and prodigal father - the word prodigal meaning **wastefully extravagant or giving something on a lavish scale.**

As Rodney Hunter puts it in *Feasting on the Gospels*, "The Pharisees and scribes had a legitimate concern, as would most churchgoing people today if faced with a similar, shocking welcome extended to their contemporary "sinners": drug dealers, pimps, porn peddlers, muggers, thieves, traffickers, criminal gangs, swindlers, and terrorists, not to mention unfaithful spouses, cheating taxpayers, computer hackers, con artists, crooked politicians, and greedy, reckless Wall Street bankers. These are the kinds of people who threaten and hurt the rest of us, who often manage to walk away from their crimes and misdeeds, and who leave the rest of us frustrated, angry, and

feeling vindictive—and for good reason.” These were the kinds of people that were listening to Jesus and who he would even eat with, and it irked the heck out of the religious leaders.

That was the setting in which Jesus was prompted to tell this story. The main characters are the Father, the younger son and the elder son. The younger son was the one who demanded his inheritance and left home with it, wasted all of it, and who then had a turning point, where he could see his life wasn't working and he decided to return home where at least he might make a living as his father's hired hand. But the Father saw him coming, and - filled with compassion - ran out to meet him and ordered new clothes for him and a party, a luau, in his honor. He would have none of this “hired hand” stuff. This was his son, who had been lost, and who was now found.

When the elder brother came in from the field he heard music and dancing and asked one of the servants what was going on. When he learned what his Father had done, he was angry, and pouted and refused to go in and join them, even when his father came out and pleaded with him. Suddenly in his eyes he saw himself as a slave. He deserved better treatment than his low-life brother, didn't he - after all he had done for his dad?

For Jesus, these “sinners” - represented by the younger son in the story - “are something more than bottom feeders and the scum of the earth; they are the “lost” who are being “found” through his preaching, teaching, and table fellowship, and whose return gives rise to a supreme joy that overwhelms all other considerations.” (Rodney Hunter) God cannot help but celebrate! God is filled with compassion for anyone who is lost, and who then - having reached a turning point - want to come back home.

For Jesus, the religious leaders - represented by the elder brother in the story - are those who don't really understand who God is, His nature, His extravagant love and compassion that can't be stuffed - it has to find expression - especially when the lost are found.

A hidden blessing in this passage? We have a God who is not an autocratic bully but a God of love, who wants us to know Him, and who loves us like no one else can. But we need to learn that we are not the center of the universe. God is. Can we learn to accept the wideness of God's mercy? Can we learn to extravagantly love returning prodigals? We are soon to see this infinite compassion move His only Son to the cross in order that we might have a restored, a reconciled relationship with God. What wondrous love is this, oh my soul?

So let's keep encouraging one another on this Lenten journey, friends.

Let's encourage each other to spend more time considering how God is at work in this world and in our lives. The ways of God can be easy to miss. They are often hidden. They are often strange - not the way we would do things.. And that's a good thing!

Thanks be to God!