

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People
Third Sunday after Pentecost – Year A

RCL Readings – Genesis 18:1-15; Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19; Romans 5:1-8; Matthew 9:35-10:8

ACNA Readings – Exodus 19:1-8; Psalm 100; Romans 5:1-11; Matthew 9:35-10:15

Introduction. More than distressing, isn't it, to hear a dear friend say, "I no longer believe. These years have been terrible for me. If God were good, he wouldn't have let these things happen to me." While it is easy to sympathize with what they have gone through, what can we say about the God who took them through it?

Common Theme. It is love that ties these passages together. They call out to God wondering what God's love really is like. The Genesis passage relates the first of the miraculous births that ultimately precede the miracle of unmatched love shown in the birth of our Lord Jesus. Psalm 100 reminds us of the joy of the eternal love of the Lord, while Psalm 116 further discusses our response to the love of the Lord, even in the face of our mortality. Romans is the reverse. It discusses the love of God even in the face of our sinfulness. Finally, Matthew points to the loving, calling, and authority of his people who serve him. Matthew portrays Jesus as concerned for the "sheep without a shepherd" and calls us to share his concern and to express our love in his service, because we have received God's love.

Genesis 18:1-15 (21:1-7). This passage depends heavily on context. Beginning in Genesis 12:2 Abram is promised to be the father of a great nation. At the time of the promise, he has no children and even after the promise from God he remains childless. He separates from his nephew, a possible heir, and is again promised in Genesis 13:15 that his own offspring will be as numerous as the dust of the earth. One of his servants becomes his heir in Genesis 15:3, but God's promise of a child is repeated; Abram takes a secondary wife and has a son but in Genesis 17:18 and 19 he is informed that this son is not the promised heir. Everything humanly possible to acquire an heir has occurred. Does God love Abraham or is he playing a cruel game? Finally, God renews the promise and says that the heir is to be called Isaac. 'Isaac' is often translated as laughter.

What is there to laugh about? There are many years between each iteration of the promise. Abram – now called Abraham – is old, nearly a hundred, and Sarah is long past menopause. When Sarah overhears God's promise in today's passage, she laughs, although she denies doing so. Laughter can be happy or zany or delighted or cynical. We can't hear Sarah's laugh, but her subsequent denial may suggest that it was cynical, or at least doubtful and pained. At this point in the story, both Abraham (Genesis 17:17) and Sarah have laughed at the prospect of people their age giving birth.

So we turn to Genesis 21:1-7, where we hear Sarah laugh again, although this time with joy. She holds in her arms the long-promised heir and invites us to join with her in her laughter, in her son Isaac, in the faithfulness of God. This post-menopausal birth is the first of the miraculous births that culminate in the most miraculous birth – the long-awaited birth of Jesus to the Virgin Mary. But how to address the woman, the couple, who are facing infertility? What can a person do when the deepest and best desire of the heart is denied, and the couple stands and watches while that desired outcome is lavished on others.

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Psalm 116: 1-2, 12-19. This psalm begins by placing a declaration of love for the Lord in the place of emphasis, at the beginning of the poetic line. Next, in the following clause in 116:1, there arises a problem in translating the Hebrew verb. The verb *shema* means to hear and uses the imperfect form, which can reflect a variety of tenses in English. How should this verb be translated into English tense structure? Should the Lord be loved because he has heard, or because of what he does or will hear? There seem to be two major approaches: either to translate in the present “The Lord listens” (for example Jerusalem Bible, *Tanakh*) or in the present perfect “the Lord has heard” (for example KJV, NIV, ESV). This verb additionally refers not only to the act of hearing but is also closely related to responsive action – often “obedience,” “heed,” and “understand”.

The final selection, verses 12-19, should probably be seen as a loose parallelism. Verses 12-14 form the first part of the parallel by posing and answering the question “What shall I render to the Lord for all his (past) benefits to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call (in future) on the name of the Lord.” Here the cup of salvation possibly refers to the libation anciently poured out with sacrifices of thanksgiving. It has additional significance for Christians as we participate in the Eucharist. The Psalmist concludes by calling again upon the name of the Lord in verse 13.

If this passage is read as a parallelism, the central significance is “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints. O Lord, I am your servant.” Although the Psalmist has been saved from the snares of death, he knows that death is inevitable.

The final three verses, 17-19, return to the theme of what we should render to the Lord for all his benefits: the sacrifice of thanksgiving; continued and renewed calling on the Lord; publicly paying our vows to the Lord in his sanctuary; and, first, finally, and always, praising the Lord. This is another way of describing love, by showing how human beings living in this suffering world may express their love for God who has heard and will continue to hear us as we cry from the depths.

Romans 5:1-11. This passage reminds us – as perhaps no other passage in the Bible – that in Christ Jesus love has been given a new and far higher meaning.

In Romans four, the topic was faith; chapter five begins a change of topic. The text catalogs benefits of faith: justification; peace with God; access to grace; and hope of glory, all through Jesus Christ. The culmination of the list comes in verse five where we read that the hope of glory does not disappoint. Why? Because God's love has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Of all the listed benefits, love tops the charts.

Who is the object of this love? The weak – verse six – and then in verse eight, the ungodly. Finally “while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Weak, ungodly, sinners!

The description continues to get worse in verse ten where we discover that we were God's enemies, in addition to weak, ungodly, and sinful.

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Still, we have been “died for.” “At the right time Christ died” for us, the ungodly. The right time was “while we were yet sinners.” We didn’t haul up our slacks, pull up our socks, and clean up our acts. Love – in God’s sense of the word – does not involve our being candidates for sainthood. We are not the focal point of this story: it is God revealing his love, self-defining what his love means. And what love means is so far from our love for those who please us. Love is for those who are his weak, ungodly, sinful enemies. It is Love that, when the time was right, died for us.

So there we have it: God’s definition of love. It is a love that does not return evil for evil. He dealt with our weak, ungodly, sinful enmity by taking our punishment to the cross. He now deals with us daily by pouring love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. So we are justified – at peace with God, have access to God – thanks to his gracious favor and joy because of our victorious hope of glory. All this is God’s love.

Matthew 9:35-10:15. Here, there is another way of describing Jesus’ love for his people. First we are told that his people reminded him of sheep without a shepherd. Many priests and pastors have their own very good examples of sheep without a shepherd.

When Jesus looked around him he saw the multitudes. Like sheep they were need of someone to shepherd them. Yet even Jesus, while on this earth, did not heal all the sick and teach all the healthy. His solution? Pray.

Pray? Surely when the sheep need to be shepherded or the harvest – Jesus’ second metaphor for his people – gathered, you don’t pray, you get out the shepherd’s crook or the scythe and get to work. But the need is not for more work but for more workers. Jesus’ compassion is to be the motivation for more and more workers – enough to bring the sheep home, the harvest into the granary. But also, not to exhaust the love given by a few workers, but to grant opportunity to many laborers to express their love.

That is exactly what happens. In chapter ten there are workers – the disciples – to send out. Jesus’ disciples are then appointed to the tasks Jesus was doing. But note what happens. As they undertake Jesus’ work, they are given power to proclaim the kingdom of heaven, heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, and cast out demons. All this without pay done, as Jesus did it, as a gift of love.

ACNA Readings

Exodus 19:1-8. These verses occur just before the giving of the Ten Commandments. The Israelites under Moses have left Egypt and reached the desolate wilderness of Sinai. They’ve been traveling for three months away from the lush Nile valley. Moses leaves the people to go up Mount Sinai. There he is told that faithful keeping of their covenant with God is a prerequisite to being a treasured possession of the Lord. The people then agree to do as the Lord has told them.

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The strangeness of this passage is hard to exaggerate. First, the Israelites were suffering in Egypt, slaving for their rulers and suffering a hideous form of “ethnic cleansing” (Exod 1:15-17). Seeing their suffering, God had done miracles through Moses and Aaron in order to move Pharaoh to free them. (Exod 7-10). However, freeing the Israelite slaves finally took the killing of the firstborn of all Egyptians on the night of Passover (Exod 11:1-12:32).

The Israelites then suffered a series of “close shaves” – the Egyptian army, the Red Sea, hunger at Elim, thirst and marauders at Rephidim, and disagreements within the Israelite community. This, God says in verse four, is how he bore the Israelites “on eagles’ wings.”

Also at issue is the nature of the covenant with God. Here in Exodus, it is contingent on the Israelites keeping it. The promise to Abraham in Genesis 12 is not contingent. Perhaps it did not need to be, since Abraham immediately followed God’s single directive and left his father’s house to go to the land God would show him. However, the repetition of the covenant to Jacob was unconditional (Gen 28:13-15).

How are we to see God’s goodness? The Israelites were pursued by the Egyptian army, but then the army was eventually washed up and never reached the shore of the sea. The Red Sea was made dry for the Israelites’ crossing. Their hunger was sated by manna – which means *What is it?*. Their thirst was slaked by a miraculous provision from a rock thought by ancient legend to have continued to follow and provide for the Israelites.

God’s ways are not our ways. The secret to the Christian life is to see what God has done and continues to do. The Israelites were not freed just because they were facing horror in Egypt. They were freed to worship their God and to be part of his plan. We cannot afford to focus solely on the ugliness and difficulty we face daily. Our secret is to look at what God is doing and the daily goodness he lavishes on us, while also being attuned to how we can serve God and to the joy and safety that only serving him can bring.

Psalm 100. This psalm is a call to worship. It is a psalm – or melody – of praise and may have accompanied the thanksgiving offerings recited along with other offerings in ancient temple worship. The first verse describes worship and defines who are called to worship: the congregation – a plural imperative – includes all the earth, which is told to worship the Lord as they shout with joy. As the congregation of the whole meets together, they are told to serve the Lord, first with joy, then with mirth. And that is just the first half of the verse. In the second half of verse two, the joy is stepped up to exultation. The repetitions imply there are scarcely enough ways to express the jubilation of this congregation.

Why such joy? Because, as we are told in verse three, they are to know that the LORD is God. At this point there is a big textual problem with one little word. Ancient manuscripts read that word as *not*. “The LORD is God, it is he that made us and – *here’s the problem* – not we ourselves.” According to this reading, our existence as worshippers is not within us, but from God himself.

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A more modern reading is “The LORD is God, it is he that has made us and – *here we go again* – we are his.” In Hebrew the difference between the two expressions is one letter – a silent letter at that!

Theologians have debated which reading is correct – most today opting for the second reading. But what if the author is a poet, one of those gifted people who can compact two meanings into one phrase? What if we are meant to understand that this world-wide congregation is now praising God both because of our origin, since he made us, and because of our present status, because we are his people, the sheep of his shepherding?

Following this pause, the procession of exulting servants of God moves forward. We enter his gates with thanksgiving. City gates were the area in ancient Israel where disputes were resolved, and judgment was given. Temple gates were the access points for worship. Here it is probably the Temple gates that are meant. We pass through the gate with songs of thanks on our lips. We proceed, entering the courtyard of the temple with praise, where we are told to give further thanks to the LORD and to bless his name.

The courtyard is our destination and having reached it, we pause our praise to remember why we are praising and blessing our God. It is because he is good. Not only is he good, but his steadfast love endures forever and his truth and faithfulness last from generation to generation, forever. The loving relationship of God to his people is eternal.

In summary the psalm proceeds from exultant worship – in verses one to two – to an understanding of our relationship to the LORD – in verse three. Then a closer worship in verse four is followed by an understanding of God's nature in verse five. We have come into his presence where we enjoy his goodness, love and faithfulness, while all that goodness extends undiminished from generation to generation eternally. Join with all the earth. Shout for greatest joy!

About the author. Rosa Lee Richards holds a Doctor of Ministry degree from Trinity School for Ministry in Ambridge, Pennsylvania. Following 9 years of teaching Hebrew at Trinity, she is retired in the mountains of New England, where she enjoys her children and grandchildren and writing.