

“Just Passing By”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, October 22, 2017

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

Readings from Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 and Exodus 33:12-23

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, because our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of people we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place where your faith in God has become known, so that we have no need to speak about it. For the people of those regions report about us what kind of welcome we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.

Exodus 33:12-23

Moses said to the Lord, ‘See, you have said to me, “Bring up this people”; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, “I know you by name, and you have also found favour in my sight.” Now if I have found favour in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favour in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people.’ He said, ‘My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.’ And he said to him, ‘If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favour in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of the earth.’

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations, and our faith to you and to the power of your holy spirit. I pray that you would take the words and images that we carry within, the words we've offered in song and in prayer, the words that we've heard read from scripture, and the words that you've laid upon my heart this morning to share. Touch, bless and transform all of these words into the living word of Jesus Christ. Let that word, the word of Christ feed us, comfort us, guide us, and invite us into service. Help that word be in our hearts this day, so that we might be your faithful people in word and in deed and in all that we do. We ask this in Christ's name. Amen.

So, today I get to preach on God from the Old Testament. And in the contemporary service at 9:05, I began by asking the congregation, "What is your image of God in the Old Testament?" And that's a crowd that is not afraid to shout out a few answers when I ask a question. So I heard things like, "mean judge", "angry grandpa". Ugh. The image that we have of God from the Old Testament is a God of judgment, a God who sees the people being wicked before Him, as it's often portrayed. God as a male. This God sees people being wicked before God and decides now and again, "I'm going to wipe them out and start over. I've had enough." And in Exodus here, Moses is dealing with God who has just said, "I've had enough of these people." While you and I were away", God says to Moses, "doing our work, deciding how to lead the people, and to give the commandments, and to do all the things that I intend to do to give all the blessings that I intend to give--while you and I were discussing all of that, the people got together and fashioned a calf, they turned it into gold, and then they worshipped it. A golden calf--because they were hungry in the wilderness and had to eat mana that fell from heaven. Instead of flakes of mana that I gave them, they wanted a golden calf. They wanted to go to Golden Corral and eat the buffet [laughter] and not trust me and not give me credit and not believe any longer that I'm their God and that I will take care of them. And so, I'll take care of them all right."

But Moses intervenes on behalf of the people. Time and again, Moses gets in God's face and says, "Wait a minute". These are your people. You've made promises to them, you've coveted with them, you are the one who said I should go lead them out of Egypt, out of the land of bondage, slavery, and oppression. You told me to go and that you would go with me. These are still the same people, even though they've messed up again. You've got to see that you and your presence and your desire on earth depends upon them. So please, please, please don't wipe them out. Give them another chance." And the Lord says to Moses, "Okay, my presence will go with you and I will give you rest." And on and on the conversation goes as Moses continues to plead and God continues to listen and Moses continues to change God's mind.

In the beginning of Exodus when Moses asks at the burning bush, "Who are you?, this voice and presence, this holy light and luminescence that's calling from a bush?". Moses says, "Who are you?" and God says, "I Am Who I Am." Now, if I were Moses at that time I would have said, "What?", probably put my shoes back on and tried to get out of there. I Am Who I Am. What does that mean? But the experience that Moses had at the bush as God revealed God's name, "I Am Who I Am," was so profound that Moses continued on his mission. Later on, during another time of conflict, during The 10 Commandments, Moses asks God again, "What is your name?" and God reveals a different, deeper aspect, "*I Am Who I Am* who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." So not only is God's name *I Am Who I Am*, but now we're starting to realize that there's a deeper, mysterious character that's being revealed. God is a God who wants to liberate people from bondage and oppression.

And then we get to this part in Exodus where Moses says again to God, "Show me your glory, I pray," and God's response is, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you the name of the Lord," which properly translated would have been, "And I proclaim before you the name, *I Am Who I Am*. I will be gracious on whom I will be gracious. I will show mercy on whom I will show mercy." In a sense, God is naming God's self yet again. Not just as the presence of *I Am Who I Am*, but also revealing that God's deepest desire is to be full of grace and mercy. And I just want to lift that before you and before myself, who often thinks of the God of the Old Testament as an angry, bitter, judging man behind a bench, whose only joy is pronouncing you guilty and sentencing you to life in prison. Here, Moses reveals that God, the God that he worships, and the God that he follows, is a God

that is filled with grace and mercy. And this is revealed to us in God's name

Earlier this week on Thursday I had the privilege--or got invited to attend Presbyterian Children's Home and Services luncheon that was here at church. I had been invited ostensibly to provide the opening blessing and so I went into Fellowship Hall, found my table, sat down. When the time came, I got up and gave the blessing, came back and ate my lovely chicken caesar salad that was sitting there in front of me along with others from the church and there are many others from the community. And after the first person spoke, they showed a video up on the screen in Fellowship Hall. Now, I didn't really know a lot about Presbyterian Children's Home and Services, but after that video, I thought, "Oh my goodness." On the video, there was a young woman who talked about what it meant for her to go to the Presbyterian Children's Home in Farmington, Missouri. See, the home actually collects all those people, young people who are in the foster care system who cannot find an adoptive home. A lot of these folks have serious life stories that they share, serious struggles involving the worst kind of things that we can imagine.

And on the video, this young woman was talking about how great it was to be at the home and to have a safe place where she could be who God intended her to be. And when she said that knowing that I was preaching on this passage, "I will be who I will be," I heard a resonance in her story that the Presbyterian Children's Home was providing her a place where she could become who God intended her to be, not who her life circumstances were forcing her to be. In a sense, she was telling us in different terms that she had been liberated from oppression and found a place of freedom, a place where she could become what God was intending her to be. After the video ended, there was a young woman who spoke. She was 17, a graduate of the Presbyterian Children's Home in Farmington, and was currently at the end of her time at their transitional housing project in Columbia. She shared her story about growing up. Again, it's just horrible. But she talked about how being a graduate of the program in Farmington, how having a mentor, and now how being in the transitional program at Columbia was changing who she was as a person. And again, she talked about a safe place and safe people to become what God intended her to be.

I leaned over to Gwen Rogers, who was sitting next to me at the luncheon, after that young woman spoke and I simply said to her, "I'm really proud to be Presbyterian." And I've been thinking about this idea of God naming God's self as a God of presence, and compassion, and grace, mercy, love, and what it means for us when we say that we're Presbyterian. A lot of times when we say that, we think of being here at church or participating in the organization of the church as elders or deacons, that sort of thing. Maybe we think about being Protestant and part of the reformed tradition. But what I want us to think about today is that when we say Presbyterian, what we mean is that we're paying attention to the people that society is trying to throw away, we are giving them a safe place, a cleft in the rock, if you will, where they can find out who they are and who God intended them to be.

I am who I am. I will be who I will be. I will show mercy upon whom I show mercy and I will be gracious upon whom I will be gracious. In the name of God, we see our mission and our conviction, our guidance. Who does God want you to be? God wants you to be yourself. How does God want you to be? God wants you to be someone who'll help others be liberated from oppression. God will want you to be someone who is gracious to those who need grace. God will want you to be someone who shows mercy upon those that need mercy. And I stand before you today and proclaim that God wants everyone to be Presbyterian. Maybe not. Amen.