

RECOUNTING GOD'S GRACIOUS DEEDS

Isaiah 63:7-9; Matthew 2:13-23

*Preached by Carolyn Grohman at North Presbyterian Church, Williamsville
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Some of you may either send or receive Christmas letters which highlight the family's activities during the past year. I receive a bunch of letters like that each year, and I've been sending Christmas letters like that to out-of-town friends for over 40 years. In addition to wishing the recipient a merry Christmas, a family newsletter sent near the end of the calendar year offers the opportunity to look back over the year and give thanks to God for God's gracious deeds.

Our Scripture lesson from Isaiah does just that--it looks back and recounts the gracious deeds of God. This is certainly an appropriate text as we near the end of the year and reflect on this year that we are leaving.

The Hebrew people to whom this passage was originally written were either the exiles living in Babylon following the destruction of Jerusalem or else those who had been left behind in the ruins of the city. Clearly, either situation was one of devastation and loss. What could there possibly be to thank God for in such a time as that?

And yet the author of Isaiah 63, in his family newsletter at the end of the year, remembers God's mercy and recounts God's gracious deeds. Even in the midst of loss and destruction and suffering, he looks back and sees the many ways in which God has helped him and others. He says, "I will recount the gracious deeds of God, the praiseworthy acts of God, because of all that God has done for us, and the great favor to the house of Israel that God has shown them according to God's mercy, according to the abundance of God's steadfast love."

Now it may seem a bit strange for this poet to talk about the great favor God had shown to the house of Israel, when in fact God had allowed them to suffer defeat at the hands of the Babylonians and to be carried off in exile to Babylon. We need to remember, however, that the Old Testament prophets always viewed the destruction of Jerusalem as punishment for the people's unfaithfulness to God. Thus, the author of Isaiah 63 would see the exile in Babylon as deserved punishment.

What is amazing, though, is that this poet sees so clearly the gracious love of God shining through the dark clouds of suffering and loss. The poet uses a crescendo of words to describe God's love for the people: gracious deeds, praiseworthy acts, great favor, mercy, abundance of steadfast love, God's people for whom God became their savior in all their distress, God's presence that saved them, God's love and pity in which God redeemed them, and God's being like a loving parent who lifted the children up and carried them.

Two of the words in this list are particularly important in helping us to understand God's relationship to the people of Israel--and also, to us. The first word is *hesed*, which is translated "gracious deeds" in the first part of verse 7 and "steadfast love" in the last part of that verse. *Hesed* is a wonderful Hebrew word that refers to God's loyalty and faithfulness to

the covenant God had made with the people of Israel. Even though the people had been unfaithful to God and had broken their part of the covenant, God remained faithful and loyal to the covenant that God had made with them. God loved them with a steadfast love---a love that never wavered.

As Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says, "This [was] how God [was] known in Israel. God [was] not known primarily in God's power or in God's demands or in God's perfection, but as utterly faithful" (*Texts for Preaching---Year A*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1995, p. 65). The word *hesed* communicates that steadfast faithfulness.

The second word that is important in helping us understand God's relationship to the people is *rehem*, which is translated "mercy." Walter Brueggemann observes that *rehem* "refers to specific acts of care; the term suggests mothering concern, tenderness, and gentleness" (*Ibid*).

Brueggemann is following the lead of John Calvin when he talks about God's mothering care. John Calvin, the father of Presbyterianism, points out in his commentary on Isaiah back in the 1500s that in this passage "God is compared to a mother who carries in the womb, bears, nurtures, guards, and keeps" (Brueggemann, *ibid*, p. 66). *Rehem*, which literally means "womb," describes the mother-love of God.

These two words, *hesed* and *rehem*, explain why the author of Isaiah 63 could be so thankful to God even in the midst of loss and suffering. *Hesed* says that God is always faithful even when we are unfaithful. Even when we are so stressed out that we forget about God, God does not forget about us. And even if we desert God, God never deserts us.

Rehem tells us that God cares for us as a loving mother cares for her child. *Rehem* proclaims the good news that even when we suffer loss or hardship or difficulties, God is always present with us, loving us and caring for us. Even when we lose our job, or we don't have enough money to retire, or our best friend moves away, or things are not going well at school, or the test results come back positive for cancer, God is present with us, holding us tenderly in the warmth and security of God's loving arms. Even when our beloved spouse dies at Christmastime, God is there with us, comforting us and wiping away our tears. Even when we ourselves walk through the valley of the shadow of death, God is there with us, lifting us up gently and carrying us from this life to the next.

Even when terrorists fly jetliners into skyscrapers, God is there in the midst of the horror and the suffering, holding the dying people in God's loving embrace. Even when an assassin murders Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan, or a mentally-ill young man guns down innocent students at Virginia Tech or Christmas shoppers at a mall in Omaha, God is there in the midst of the suffering and the chaos, weeping with those who weep.

These 21st-century massacres are somewhat reminiscent of the massacre of the infants retold in our Gospel lesson for today. Matthew describes the horror of that first massacre, when Herod ordered the death of all children in and around Bethlehem who were two years of age or under. In painting a picture of utter devastation and grief, Matthew quotes a verse from Jeremiah, chapter 31: "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more" (Jeremiah 31:15).

On 9/11 we saw and heard on television scenes like that: mothers weeping and wailing for their grown children who worked in the World Trade Center Towers. We also heard similar lamentations later from mothers in Iraq whose children were killed in the bombing raids, and from Israeli and Palestinian mothers whose children were killed in the fighting there. And like Rachel weeping for her children, so God weeps for God's children, all of them---Jewish, Muslim, and Christian; Arab, Iraqi, and American.

In a book of worship resources entitled *Cloth for the Cradle* from the Iona Community in Scotland, there is a reading for this Sunday. I want to read part of it to you:

*"A voice was heard in Ramah,
sobbing and loudly lamenting;
it was Rachel weeping for her children,
refusing to be comforted because they were no more.*

*"And many had wept before her:
mothers of Israel,
captive in Egypt,
afraid to give birth to a boy,
lest he be slaughtered because Pharaoh was threatened.*

*"And many have cried after her,
mothers of Israel,
their homeland occupied,
afraid for the boys they had borne,
lest they be slaughtered because Herod was threatened.*

*"And many still cry:
the mothers of Israel
and Palestine
and Lebanon
and Syria,"
[and Iraq,]
"caught up in a holy war which sacrifices their children.*

*"And still we cry,
for babies who did not live for long,
or never saw the light of day,
or grew up only to be cut down by illness, abuse, or slaughter.*

*"A voice was heard in Ramah,
sobbing and loudly lamenting;
it was Rachel weeping for her children,
refusing to be comforted because they were no more."*

---*Cloth for the Cradle*, Iona Community, Wild Goose Worship Group, GIA Publications, 2000, pp. 118-120.

The original verse from Jeremiah about Rachel weeping refers to the devastation of Jerusalem and the exile in Babylon. But the next two verses in Jeremiah offer a word of hope: "Thus says the Lord: Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; for there is a reward for your work, says the Lord; they shall come back from the land of the enemy; there is hope for your future, says the Lord" (Jeremiah 31:16-17).

*“A voice is heard in Ramah
and in all the places of sadness.
It is the voice of God,
who as a mother,
has seen the pain of her children and seen beyond it.*

*‘Keep your voice from weeping
and keep your eyes from tears;
for your grieving has been heard
and your work shall be rewarded.*

*‘There is hope for your future.
I have prepared a place for your children
and will keep them in perfect peace,
until the old things have disappeared
and there is a new heaven
and there is a new earth.’”*

---Cloth for the Cradle, pp. 120- 121

There is hope for our future, hope because God has promised to be with us; hope because God sent God’s Son Jesus to be Emmanuel, God-with-Us; hope because Jesus grew up and gave his life that we might live; hope because the Holy Spirit can and does bring about change.

So, because of God’s faithful and steadfast love, and because God cares for us as a loving mother and father, we can join with Jeremiah and with the author of Isaiah 63 in recounting God’s gracious deeds as we look back over the past year.

As we enter a new year, let us remember the many ways in which God has cared for us in the past, and know that God will continue to care for us, with steadfast love and faithfulness, throughout the coming year.

Let us pray. “Gracious God, in your motherly heart, you share and bear the pain of all who grieve for lost” loved ones and all who suffer any kind of loss. Go with us through this coming year, that we may be sustained by your tender, loving care. Amen. (Quoted portion from *Cloth for the Cradle*, p. 121.)