

A SERMON FROM SAINT FRANCIS

THE GLORY OF GOD'S MERCY

A sermon preached by the Rev. William Munro Shand, III, the Second Sunday in Lent, February 28, 2010 at Saint Francis Episcopal Church, Potomac, Maryland. Based on Genesis 15: 1 – 18.

Et après l'avoir conduit dehors, il dit: Regarde vers le ciel, et compte les étoiles, si tu peux les compter. Et il lui dit: Telle sera ta postérité.

— *Genèse 15: 5*

Lord, have mercy upon us and incline our hearts to keep thy Law." "O God, whose glory is always to have mercy." "There's a wideness in God's mercy, like the wideness of the sea." "Of thy tender mercy [thou] didst give thine only Son, Jesus Christ, to take our nature upon him..." "Thou art the same Lord whose property is always to have mercy..." One would have to be blind and deaf to miss the recurring theme in this service of God's mercy. It is the warp and woof of the fabric of this service. It is the glory and the essential property of God: Mercy, mercy as wide as the sea.

The cynic can ask, How can one speak of the mercy of God in a world where earthquakes rattle the foundations of the sleeping, where infants die of starvation or disease, and where the good die young of undeserved illness, where things happen without explanation, often in ways that do not seem to us to be fair or good? Should we not join with the cynic to say that either God is merciful, but powerless to prevent such tragedies, or that God remains omnipotent, but essentially indifferent to our human situation – and thus not really all that merciful? No, the cynic raises no easy dilemma, nor a new one.

What do we mean by the mercy of God? When I was a child, I learned by heart the 100th Psalm, singing it week by week as the canticle the Church styles as *Jubilate Deo* – "O be joyful in the Lord, all ye lands." Many Sundays we sing those words here, and you will recognize the culminating verse: "For the Lord is gracious; his mercy is everlasting; and his truth endureth from generation to generation." As I said, I learned those words by memory when I was a child, not because I had anyone drill them into me as a memory exercise — although that would have been a perfectly

fine way to learn them — but because I sang them week after week. Of course, I did not appreciate them then. It was only as I grew older, and especially as I came to understand my own need for the mercies of God, something few children ever consider (this former child included). That is one of those truths we come to only when our honesty begins to match our years. And even then, I think I learned but one aspect of God's mercy, and even at that, not the most important aspect, but a consequence of something more profound.

So now, we continue to sing and pray and trust in God's mercy. Did you know the Bible does not much apply the notion of mercy to our sins, and that it does not link God's mercy to such notions as atonement and forgiveness? Those are other matters and important. When we say we rely upon God's mercy, we are not saying we rely upon it because we need to escape the consequences of sin. We are not saying that God will forgive and forgive and forgive and forgive, endlessly and without cost, nor do we presume upon that, to use a verb we shall use again shortly in this service. And yet, the Psalmist told us, and children sing, "God's mercy is everlasting." What do we mean?

We might look to Abraham for a clue. Consider him as we find him in today's reading from Genesis: Childless, aged, with no prospects of a family. A later Biblical author describes him at this point as being "as good as dead." And yet, it is of God's mercy, God's *loving-kindness* as Miles Coverdale put it, that Abraham becomes the father of descendents as numerous as the very stars of heaven, or grains of sand on the shore. It is of God's mercy that this is so, not of Abraham's merit, nor even of God's

forgiveness of the old man for some long-forgotten offense. It is God's unbidden, unbounded love that makes this true. God's glory is that he loves his people. That love is the glorious mercy of God.

Abraham had no Scripture, no creed, no Tradition, no body of believers to guide or encourage him — none of the assets we have, none of those things we have right here at St Francis. What he did have was the grace to build his life upon the Lord as upon a rock. His faith was his trust; his response was not to a notion or an idea or a program, not something invented by church planners or a vestry of a committee of thinkers, not something crafted by theologians or composers, or preachers. His response was to the loving-kindness of God, the God whose property and glory are always to have mercy.

It seems to me that we most often think of God's mercy in the obverse; that is, we think of it most when we feel deprived of it: Illness, tragedy, injustice, even death. *How can God allow such things! We cry in outrage. It isn't fair! What did I do to deserve this?*

But, do we ask the same question at other times? When you see your child asleep in his bed, when you

know the love of your spouse, when your soul thrills to the music of praise or the beauty of creation, even snowfall on a Maryland meadow, or at times too numerous to mention — do you ask then the same question: *What did I do to deserve this?* Do you remember then that it is of the loving-kindness and mercy of God that such things are true and eternal?

We are in a time of the year when all of us who have erred and strayed like lost sheep are bidden to come home — with penitent hearts, hearts that long for a fresh start in a new direction. We are called home, we are invited to come with steadfast faith — that means trust, trust like Abraham's, to embrace the one who longs to embrace us and to help us know the ultimate manifestation of the mercies of God: The loving-kindness we find in the merciful Word of God made flesh, Jesus Christ.

The glory of God's mercy is that eternal loving-kindness in relationship with him, and the covenant which asserts that nothing in all of creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. That is the glory of God's mercy.

For more information about Saint Francis Episcopal Church and its life of faith and mission please contact the church office at 10033 River Road, Potomac, Maryland 20854, or by calling us at 301-365-2055.

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