

Proper 26, Year A
October 30, 2011
Psalm 107: 1-9, 33-43

If we really read and meditated on this morning's psalm, Psalm 107, I dare say, many in this congregation would be extremely uncomfortable with its message. What it teaches is diametrically opposed to what much of contemporary North American culture teaches people. Just studying this psalm this past week made me do some fairly basic sorting out in my own mind between cultural values and biblical teaching.

We read only two selected portions of this psalm morning. Psalm 107 is a wonderfully crafted sermon about God's steadfast love. It begins in verses 1-3 with an invitation for a congregational response. Then four vivid word pictures are presented. Verses 4-9 are the first of these word pictures. In this opening narrative the calamity that these people find themselves in is not their fault.

- 4 Some wandered in desert wastes; *
they found no way to a city where they might dwell.
- 5 They were hungry and thirsty; *
their spirits languished within them.

In the next word picture which we didn't read this morning (verses 10-16), the people brought calamity upon themselves:

- 10 Some sat in darkness and deep gloom, *
bound fast in misery and iron;
- 11 Because they rebelled against the words of God *
and despised the counsel of the Most High.
- 12 So he humbled their spirits with hard labor; *
they stumbled, and there was none to help.

So what would have been the typical responses of our society to these two narratives of trouble? Or a little closer to home, what is your usual default response to a difficult situation?

Be honest! Doesn't our society, our friends and family measure our "maturity" by how self-sufficient we are? Aren't we taught that we must earn what we have? Aren't we taught that we must pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps when we are down? Aren't we subtly taught that wisdom is getting ahead in whatever way we can manage without getting caught? Aren't we taught that our only security results from careful planning, investment, and management? That's certainly the clear message I received growing up. In short, we are taught to be self-made persons. In short, I thought that I was God. And that sick, really sick thinking is killing me – physically, emotionally and spiritually. If I am a self-sufficient person there is no need to cry to God for help, and consequently no need to thank God for anything. Seldom, if ever, does it occur to us that human life

depends on God. It seems that only real disaster and death wakes us up to the reality that we really aren't self-sufficient and we really don't have and never did have things under control.

What does our psalm say is the biblical response to disaster, whether self-inflicted or not? Listen again to the admonition of verse 43:

43 Whoever is wise will ponder these things, *
and consider well the mercies of the LORD.

The response of the hungry and thirsty ones in the first word picture and the ones "bound fast in misery and iron" of the second was the same.

Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, * (6, 13)

We are told to quit being self-sufficient, to swallow our pride and cry out to God for help. How hard is that? Do we think God is too busy elsewhere to help us in our distress? Do we think God won't help us because we don't deserve help? Why would you not cry out for help? This psalm makes the point in each of the four word pictures that if we want God's help, we must take the initiative and ask for it. We must become humble and dependent and call for help. Don't delay, call now. And then what does the psalm say?

6
and he delivered them from their distress.

7 He put their feet on a straight path *
to go to a city where they might dwell.
and he delivered them from their distress.

13
and he delivered them from their distress.

14 He led them out of darkness and deep gloom *
and broke their bonds asunder.

I would suspect that after we cry out to God for help, there would be a time – short or long – when we need to carefully listen for/attend to how God will release us/save us from our distressing situation. We will want to recognize and cooperate with the angelic help God is sending. Watch carefully for God's liberating work.

But the psalm doesn't stop there with God's timely aid. In both word pictures the response is a general and then a specific thanksgiving.

8 Let them give thanks to the LORD for his mercy *
and the wonders he does for his children.

9 For he satisfies the thirsty *
and fills the hungry with good things.

15 Let them give thanks to the LORD for his mercy *
and the wonders he does for his children.

16 For he shatters the doors of bronze *
and breaks in two the iron bars.

So the message of Psalm 107 is simple, but radical. There is ultimately no such thing as self-sufficiency for human life depends on God. The good news is that we can depend on God. God is good, and God shares God's goodness. God loves us with a steadfast love. We, as Christians profess that this love is manifested in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus called people to acknowledge and to live under God's sovereignty and to renounce self-sufficiency and walk the way of the cross in dependence upon God.

The fundamental attitude and activity of faithful Christian and Jews will be gratitude for God's goodness and steadfast love.

1 Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, *
and his mercy endures for ever.