

MESSAGE: “Unfailing Love”

Text: Exodus 34:1-8

Purpose: the purpose of this message is to awaken the human heart to God’s unfailing love in its nuances of presence and redemption.

The first parish I served as a full-time pastor was one which we refer to as a ‘two-point’ charge, that is, two churches served by one pastor. The churches were 19 miles apart, with one hour between worship times: one hour for good-bye to church #1, travel and hello to church #2. With three small children in tow, it was a challenge, but ‘do-able,’ if nothing went wrong. One Sunday, the inevitable happened. Our four-year-old daughter, Elsbeth was missing. There were only so many places she could be, and we, with help from the congregation, looked everywhere: Sunday school loft, pews, attic, forest surrounding the church, even the village store up the street. Just about the time we considered notifying the police, someone lifted the cloth that covered the altar. There she was, fast asleep.

This is in stark contrast to the fear that the Israelites had at the base of Mount Sinai as the mountain trembled with thunder, flashes of lightening, smoke and fire. This was a God not to be trifled with, unapproachable, remote and dangerously holy. “Go ahead, Moses,” they urged, “speak for us, for we dare not approach the mountain of God.” There are some who conclude, “That sums up the difference between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New.” But this is not the case. There is far more grace to be found in the God of the Old Testament than we might think, and, conversely, more accountability in the God of the New than we might like to admit.

Many of the struggles we have with God spring from a misunderstanding of God’s nature. Who is God really? Is God to be trusted? Why does God let me stumble sometimes? Why doesn’t God prevent bad things from happening? Does God really care? We are quick to evaluate God on the basis of our own experience. When things go well, we feel God’s love. When things go badly, we feel like God has deserted us.

This dynamic is not exactly new. I recall an observation made by one of my comparative religions instructors: “Ancient cultures,” he said, “viewed God through the lens of their communal experience. Egypt, for example, which had predictable weather rhythms with the Nile viewed the Divine as benign, whereas populations surrounding the Tigris-Euphrates River valley sustained very unpredictable weather with storms and floods that destroyed without warning. Their view of the Divine was much more capricious.”

It’s a good thing, then, that experience, inherently subjective, is just one of the ways we come to know God. Reason, tradition and most especially scripture combine to help us

know who God is what God's relationship to us is. I invite you to join me in reading Exodus 34:1-8. In this text, we hear from God's own perspective what the core of God's nature is.

First, let me offer a bit of context. Moses, with God's guidance, has led the Hebrew slaves out of Egypt and into the desert. They have experienced God's deliverance at every turn. They have safely crossed the Sea of Reeds and have come to the base of Mount Sinai, the holy mountain. There God gave Moses the stone tablets of commandment that will serve as a covenant between God and God's people. Trouble immediately surfaces, however, as the Israelites create and worship a golden calf, breaking the first commandment (You shall have no other gods before me) even before it is delivered. When Moses learns of the idolatry, he breaks the stone tablets and punishment follows. God threatens to withdraw God's presence, but Moses intercedes and another chance is given.

(Read Exodus 34:1-8)

This appearance of God builds upon Moses' first encounter with God at a burning bush. On that occasion, God reveals the Divine name, Yahweh, which may be translated, "I am who I am." This time, God's revelation dives deeper than name into the waters of nature, character and profound identity. In Jewish tradition, this theophany, or appearance of God, is known as the *Thirteen Attributes of God*, and is recited on festival days when Torah (first 5 books of the Bible) is read. In Christian tradition, the mercy of God is proclaimed to signify forgiveness after the confession of sin.

If someone asks you the question, 'Who is God?', point to Exodus 34:6-7, for there we find God's own autobiography" "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin..."

Notice that the very essence of God's nature is the characteristic of 'unfailing love.' This attribute is emphasized as that which God abounds in. What, then, is unfailing love? The scope of the word, *hesed*, translated from the original Hebrew extends far beyond what I can share with you this morning, but there are two themes that I believe tower above the others. The first is God's 'unfailing presence.'

In the New Testament, just before Jesus ascends to heaven, he proclaims to his disciples, "Surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age." (Mt. 28:20). That is great comfort to us, but it is simply a restatement of a promise made centuries earlier and recorded in the Hebrew Testament. We know it in its "I will never leave you or forsake you" pattern (Dt 31:6). God's character is such that those who place their trust in God will never be deserted.

God's unfailing presence does not mean that God is always on the watch ready to catch us in mischief; it means that God is guardian of our well-being. We may trust God. The knowledge that God is present helps us conduct ourselves each day with a basic sense of security. I observe this in my 2-year-old grandson Jonah. One day as we read books with him, he jumped up and said, "Slide! Slide!" meaning he wanted to play on his slide in the other room. We said it was ok, so he went to play on the slide. Moments later, he peeked into the room just to make sure we were all still there, and then returned to play on the slide some more. As long as he knew we were there, he was content to play.

There are other times when Jonah is less confident of his surroundings. In those moments, he clings to Mommy or Daddy, knowing he is safe in their arms. If that is how it is between parents and child, how much more will be reassured of God's unfailing presence? God does not promise to insulate us from trouble or challenge, but God does promise to be with us, even in the shadow of death itself.

If God is guardian of our wellbeing, it follows that divine provision is not sloppy indulgence, but provision with a view toward growth and maturity. I mention this because there are times when each of us is guilty of presuming upon God's goodness. We say things like, "God has to save me; I never asked to be born," or "God will never let that happen, because God would never give me more than I can bear," or, "God owes me this." Remember the prayer Jesus taught us? "Thy will be done," not "My will be done."

When we are presumptuous of God's unfailing love, we are sometimes disciplined. God confronts us with the character and mandate of covenant love. But when we are desperate, God will demonstrate unfailing love by redeeming us in our circumstances.

This is the second great theme of God's unfailing love: unfailing redemption. God's unfailing redemption is not a one-time gift that leaves us scrambling when mistakes are made. It is continuing and constant care and redemption. God sees us through thick and thin. What would have happened to the Israelites if God brought them out of Egypt but left them to fend for themselves at the Sea of Reeds? They would have been killed or returned to slavery. What would have happened if God had abandoned the Israelites on the other side of the sea? They would have died of thirst or hunger. God did not abandon them even after they broke the covenant defining their relationship with God. God gave them another chance, because God's basic nature is love--always forgiving, always present, always redeeming.

Over the years of Christian history, far too many have taught and preached the heresy that fear is the heart of love. It is nothing of the sort. Perfect love casts out fear! God's love is perfect. We don't need to hide in fear of God. The altar is not too holy to approach. In fact, it may be the very best place to rest in God's heart.

