

Nov 15

Always Grace

Psalm 103:1-14

As we end our series on perplexing scriptures the author decides in the last chapter to not focus on some challenging scripture but on a bigger and equaling perplexing idea. Is the God of the Old Testament different from the God of the New Testament? He challenged us to Google this question and when you do you get lots of hits talking about the God of Wrath, old, and the God of Love, new. This division is as old as our faith. There was a bishop named Marcion of Sinope who lived in the second century. Marcion concluded that the God of the Old Testament and the God of Jesus Christ were wholly incompatible. Marcion rejected all of the Old Testament, removed all references to Judaism from the Gospel of Luke, the one Gospel he considered authoritative, included the Acts of the Apostles plus ten letters of Paul that he also edited and said this was the Bible his followers should use. Marcion's teachings earned him an excommunication and a place on the list of history's most notorious heretics. But the idea that the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New are incompatible didn't disappear. This led to many rejecting the words of the Old Testament. It also led to the justification of the pogroms against Jews because, the logic went, they were worshipping a false God. To this day non-believers challenge us on the division between Old and New. They ask, which God do we serve? People new to the faith find it shocking to hear that Jesus was a devout Jew. Does that mean he worshiped a God of wrath? If so his words of grace do not match with his faith.

All of this is very perplexing. We need to understand that the Bible, even in the Old Testament proclaims a vision of a Gracious God. It just gets lost in all those other perplexing scriptures that call for killing and destroying people in God's name. Let's look at just a few examples.

Eve and then Adam eat the forbidden fruit. As part of their punishment they are banished from the Garden of Eden. It says that God provided them clothes of animal skins before they were sent out. This is definitely an upgrade from fig leaves. God didn't have to do it. It was a kind and generous act. Likewise, as we hear of Cain's

punishment for killing his brother Able we also hear that God places a mark on his forehead, letting all know he is protected by God; certainly a gracious act. We have God putting up with a recalcitrant Jonah, a God who continues to love the people of Israel even when they continually worship other gods and ignore God's prophets. The Psalm read today is one of many psalms that are celebrating God's good deeds.

But we also have to be honest and see that tales of God's wrath do not disappear when we get to the New Testament. We have heard the story of Ananias and Sapphira, many of Jesus' parables talk about God's punishment with much gnashing of teeth. So, according to historical orthodox Christianity there is no inconsistency between the Old Testament God of Israel and the New Testament God of Jesus. God's mercy and God's justice are at work throughout scripture, in both the Old and New Testaments.

We tend to focus on stories about the wrath of God, because we are so uncomfortable with that image of God. We point to it as not being really a part of our faith. Yet our predecessors in the faith were just the opposite. They expected a wrathful God. It was this fear of punishment that kept them on the straight and narrow. Often, as we have seen, they took this wrathful image of God as justification for genocide, violence, and much worse. Even to this day we have many people who claim, in the name of faith, to condone violence towards groups or classes of people or to ignore the needs of some saying they need to live with the consequences of their choices. Even though we say we are Christians following the New Testament God of Grace, we often find it easier to justify our actions by lifting up the wrathful passages of the Bible.

Today, I want to focus on the message of Grace that is found throughout the Bible and what it tells us. In this series we looked at those verses from the Old Testament that seemingly condoned the violence done by the Israelites as they entered into the Promised Land. They tore through the land of Moab before arriving at the city of Jericho which they utterly destroyed at the beginning of their conquest. Even with some words about treating the foreigner amongst you with kindness it seems there is little grace or compassion for those who had first lived in this land. Then we have the story of Ruth. Ruth was from Moab. She is the hero of the story. Through her faithfulness she

gives life back to Naomi, her mother-in-law. She is the great grandmother of King David and that places her in the genealogy of Jesus. Here is grace. Here is a message of love for all, not just for the chosen. It challenges us today when we look at the Palestinian/Israeli conflict. The Palestinians are the descendants of Ruth. That idea is challenging for us today.

Recently we have also looked at the story of the rich man who was told to sell all. When he refused Jesus said how hard it is for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. He then goes on to say that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for that to happen. The disciples are aghast and say, "Then who can be saved." Jesus shares the word of grace, "but with God nothing is impossible." We face so many impossibilities in our lives and relationships. It is words of Jesus like this that give us hope and help us to journey forward.

The Bible ends with grace as it began. When you read the book of Revelation it is hard to find the messages of grace until you look for them. We hear words about how those who have the mark of the beast are condemned to the lake of fire. No grace there, or is there? Revelation also sees a second chance for them. This judgement is not the last word. And the book ends with a vision of a New Jerusalem where God will dwell among us. The time of Adam and Eve will be restored. They, remember, walked in the garden and talked with God. There was a close relationship. The Bible ends with the promise that there is no need for a temple because God will dwell among them. There are, to use the author's terminology, "Gobs and gobs of grace in the Bible." This is the good news of our faith.

But as much as we celebrate grace, and as we see it is found through the Biblical account, we are also reminded that God holds us accountable for our actions. There are consequences to the choices we make. There is the call for repentance, to go in a new direction, as well. Grace and judgment, judgement and grace; both are found in the Bible. The Old Testament emphasized one while Jesus the other but God's love for us is consistent. God's call to faithfulness, to following God's word never changes. May we hear the challenge and respond.

What are the implications of this theology? There are many. It challenges us to be tolerant, especially for those different from us, however you want to define different. It challenges us to remember that justice and all that means belongs with God and not with us so it is not our role to impose what we consider God's wrathful judgement on others. It means striving to live by principals of love and forgiveness. It means looking for the good in each person and in all situations.

Think about this simple situation. You are at the grocery store when an acquaintance comes up to you and just unloads about a situation. I don't care what it is, our church, a mutual friend's behavior, an experience at the doctor. You name it. What is your response? Do you get angry for having to deal with this unprovoked outburst and let them know of your anger? Do you enter in to the spirit of the conversation and share your own frustrations about this or some other situation? Or do you step back internally and think, this person must be having a really bad day. What can I do to help? How do I help them see the positives? Or how do I release it and move on praying for them and hoping God heals their anger? If you recall there are gobs and gobs of grace you know what to do.

These have been perplexing scriptures that we have looked at. They force us to think about what we read and examine the context of the scriptural events and our theology. It is hard work. At times we would just wish for people to tell us what to think so we can either accept or reject the interpretation. But we are called to be better than that. To listen, to pray, to examine and learn, that is how we grow in faith and ultimately make sense of all of our Bible instead of just ignoring the parts we do not understand.