

Text: Psalm 107
Title: A Hymn of *Hesed*
Date: 03.22.09
Roger Allen Nelson

There is a Sufi story with a powerful image:

Once upon a time there was an old woman who used to meditate in the morning on the bank of the Ganges River. One day, finishing her meditation, she saw a scorpion floating helplessly in the strong current. As the scorpion was pulled closer it got caught in some roots that branched out into the river. The scorpion struggled frantically to free itself but only got more entangled. The old woman immediately reached out to the drowning scorpion, which, as soon as she touched it, stung her.

She withdrew her hand, regained her balance, and once again tried to save the scorpion, but every time she tried, the scorpion's tail stung her so badly that her hand became bloody and her face distorted with pain.

A passerby who saw the old woman struggling with the scorpion shouted, "What is wrong with you, you old fool? Do you want to kill yourself to save that ugly thing?" Looking into the stranger's eyes the woman answered, "Because it is the nature of the scorpion to sting, why should I deny my own nature to save it?"

To state the obvious ~ that story gets at the essential nature of a thing.
It is the essential nature of the scorpion to sting.
It is the essential nature of the old woman to save.

Well, this morning I invite you to consider the essential nature of God.
I know that seems a grandiose and presumptuous enterprise for a quiet spring morning, but I invite you to the questions of:

How do we know the nature of God?
What is the nature of God?
Is God, by nature, involved, angry, rational, fair?
Is it God's nature to be demanding, forgiving, just, distant?
How can we know anything of God's nature?

If we retrieve the language from last Sunday..... A deist welcomes the idea of God, but when that God has a name, or a face, or a word, or a Torah, then things get sticky. For a deist the "idea" of God is about all that we can know of God. God may create a world that is brimming with beauty, dynamic with diversity, and full of gentle hearted old women and stinging scorpions, but we can't know anything essential of God's nature.

What is the nature of God?
How do we know the nature of God?

Scripture ~ the other lens, again to pick up last week's imagery ~ testifies to the nature of God. Essential to the Judeo-Christian faith is the understanding that the nature of God is revealed in the scriptures. Through story, history, poem, law, prophecy, parable, gospel, letter, and psalm the nature of God is pointed to, presented, pondered, and proclaimed.

And, in Psalm 107, the psalmist repeats a refrain that God loves.
In our translation:

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endured forever...

Or,

...give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love...

Now, words are slippery and they get even slipperier when you try to translate from language to language and culture to culture. And, the word used here for love is especially slippery. It gets translated in a variety of different ways, its meaning changes with different contexts, and biblical scholars can't seem to agree on a clear definition.

The word used for here for God's love is *hesed* or *chesed*. It is root word of Hasidic. *Hesed* is usually translated as loving kindness, or mercy, or steadfast love. What is lost in translation is that *hesed* also has the sense of covenantal loyalty or relational fidelity.

It is not a love of heavenly whimsy.

It is not a love of rising and relentless passion.

It is not a love that is vague or generalized.

It is a love that is promised.

I saw a gentleman in the hospital recently and he told me of an old couple with whom he shared a hospital room.

The man was in his late eighties: weak, wheezy, and confused. His wife sat by his side during the day and dozed through the night in the same hospital chair. When her husband would stir, she would go to his side and give him ice chips, straighten the covers, and brush his hair back. He would ask, "Who are you? Do I know you? Are you my sister?" He didn't recognize or remember his wife. And, she would gently say, again and again, "No dear, I'm your wife." But, it didn't seem to register with him; he would look back at her blank and buffaloed.

As the gentleman I was seeing told me of watching this exchange his eyes welled up with water and he blinked back a tear as he proclaimed it was one of the most beautiful things he had ever seen. In his words, "A love like that means the whole world. They have everything...."

We can get to close to the idea of *hesed* if we see it as that kind of covenantal love. Scripture teaches that God is by nature a covenant making God ~
not a God of indifference,
not a God who waits in the wings for others to make a move,
not a God who walks away,
but a God who desires, values, and commits self to a relationship.
And, even as marriage is an image of it, God's love is loyal and enduring.

The world of full of people who believe in God; that God is loving is a big big leap.

Psalm 107 is hymn of *hesed*; it is a hymn to that kind of love. It opens with an invitation for the redeemed, gathered from all corners of creation, to give thanks for the *hesed* of God. And, then the psalm has four stanzas, each that follow a similar pattern:

First, there is the identification of a people who suffered adversity:
Some wandered in the wasteland, perishing from hunger and thirst.
Some sat in deep-dark-dank prisons.
Some were sick (or sin-sick) unto death.
Some were lost on stormy seas, reeling and staggering like drunks.

Then each one of those four categories of people cried out to God in their distress and God delivered them. Therefore, each stanza ends with a summons to praise the Lord for his *hesed*.

The pattern:
Dire straights
Desperate plea
Divine deliverance
Direction for thanksgiving

Now, part of what we can say is that our knowledge of God's nature is rooted in history. The psalmist looks backward and bears witness to what God did in the past. Psalm 107 is the shared story of a love that didn't leave them stranded in the wilderness, or stuck in prison, or dead in sin, or lost at sea. Psalm 107 sings of the troubles of life and the despair that causes us to cry out to God ~ but it also celebrates a God who responds out of an enduring promised love.

The world of full of people who believe in God; that God is loving is a big big leap.

Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggeman, offers this slant:

Imagine a world without Psalm 107. What if there were no one to sing this great song of thanks, no acknowledgment of rescue grounded in fidelity, no communal awareness that life consists in situations of distress, and above all no recognition of the cry of distress that sets in motion the divine mystery of rescue? Imagine a world without cry, without the public processing of pain....Imagine a world that

has grown silent and cold of human pain. Imagine a world totally silenced, no prayers uttered, no hopes voiced, no hosting of the human condition and, consequently, no miracles of newness or healing.

For that reason, our worship must not be too happy, too well ordered, or too symmetrically serene, for at the heart of our worship is asking in need, being answered, and being taken seriously.

Dear friends, no matter where you are this morning ~
wandering in the desert,
chained up by something you can't break,
wrapped up in a rebellion that is killing you,
tossed about on waves that are bigger than you can sail ~
no matter where you are, cry out to God. God will answer because of *hesed*.
In a time of Lent, cry out to God. God will answer because of *hesed*.

I opened this mediation with a Muslim story and we've been considering a Jewish text,
and yet the good news is that creation cried out to God,
with groans deeper than words creation cried out in travail, and God heard....
God heard not just the individual cries for deliverance,
but God heard the desperate cries of a creation that is
bone dry in the wilderness with life at low ebb,
imprisoned to a bitter labor,
languishing near the gates of death,
tossed about by a tempest....

God heard the cries of the world that he created and
because of *hesed*,
because he so loved the world,
because steadfast love is his very nature, he came to deliver us.
Even bloodied and stung unto death, it is in his essential nature to save.

Jesus Christ, even Christ on the cross, is the clearest expression of the nature of God.
The *hesed* of God is embodied in Jesus.
God has heard creation's cry and responded in love in Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God.
Amen.