

MERCY MERCY ME
Rev. Gusti Linnea Newquist
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Based on Psalm 123. A Prayer for Mercy

Our Lesson this week comes again from the hymnal of the Bible: the book of Psalms. And from a particular section of 15 hymns called the Songs of Ascent.

Most likely, these 15 psalms are sung by Jewish pilgrims throughout the Mediterranean, as they journey to the temple in Jerusalem for various festivals, including the Passover.

We can be sure that Jesus himself, along with his beloved community making their pilgrimage from Galilee to Holy Week, sings this psalm 123 along the way. A song of “rising,” I like to call it, as Jesus climbs the hill from the valley to the temple in Jerusalem.

As Jesus and his community walk and talk and pray and plot, they sing:

(in my own interpretive translation)

To You, O God,
you who dwell in the heavens,
I lift up my eyes.

In the same way a butler
or a lady-in-waiting
watches her employer intently,
waiting for the slightest motion of a hand,
our eyes are trained upon God,
with attentive readiness,
ready to spring into action
when God has mercy on us.

Have mercy on us, God.
Have mercy on us,
for we have had more than enough of contempt.
Our life-force is drained
from too much scoffing by those who are at ease,
by the contempt of the proud.

And thus the song abruptly ends ...

And through these words, may we hear a Word of Hope!

Amen.

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Oh mercy, mercy, me, the great Marvin Gaye – Prince of Soul – sings. Fifty years ago now. About the environment and how we have an obligation to care for the Earth.

Oh, mercy, mercy me ...

The son of a Pentecostal pastor, whose sermons, he said, were his greatest influence, Marvin Gaye wrote “Mercy Me” as part of his own spiritual quest, which he describes in an interview with *Sounds* magazine a few years later:

“My idea of living,” Marvin Gaye says, “is I would love to become an impeccable warrior ... interested in knowledge and power that this earth will give us ... and I would like to use [that power] in a good fashion,” he says. With mercy and justice and compassion at the heart of who we are.

Mercy, mercy me!

“I would like to use power ... in a *good* fashion”!

Imagine that!

We do not find that at first in the story of the Good Samaritan, shared with our children earlier today.

The robbers on the road, for example, with the power of their numbers combined with the power of their weapons, use their power for harm. Nearly taking the life of the one without the power of numbers combined with the power of weapons.

The robbers do get what they want – maybe – for a moment. But life is very literally on the line. Death is very literally winning the day. The misuse of the power of numbers combined with the power of weapons brings destruction and death.

Oh, mercy, mercy me.

But there’s hope! The story goes on. Two members of the clergy – with political and religious power galore – surely they can help. Sure I would help! Surely you would help! We hope? But they walk on by. Closing their eyes to the suffering right in front of them. And they do nothing. Nothing! Rendering their great religious and political power impotent in the face of suffering and sorrow.

Who knows what the clergy want in this story. But life is very literally on the line. Death is very literally winning the day, when political and religious power looks the other way.

Oh, mercy, mercy me

And then hope plummets. A stranger, an outcast, comes along, with the power to finish the job against his enemy if he wishes. A hated Samaritan, believed to be worse than the robbers themselves. O mercy, mercy me.

But then something happens. Completely out of character – or at least our expectations of his character – the Samaritan moves with compassion. The Hebrew literally means the Samaritan feels the life of the dying man as if he bore that man in his womb. And because the Samaritan is moved to feel the life of his enemy as if he

bore that man in his womb, the Samaritan acts with mercy. Sparing the life of the dying man. And, using the additional power of the purse just a few verses later, healing and restoring and renewing that man's life.

Oh, mercy, mercy me!

Jesus tells us to go and do likewise.

Compassion. Mercy. This is the power of God, according to the Scriptures: the power to spare and heal and renew and restore life, when by all rights you could destroy it.

Which is what Jesus finds out, just a few months after sharing the story of the mercy of the Good Samaritan. Jesus finds himself singing and praying and talking and plotting with his disciples on their pilgrimage to Passover in Jerusalem. On the very same road the Samaritan travels.

And I am guessing that story comes to Jesus's mind as he ascends the great hill, singing Psalm 123. I am guessing the mercy of the Samaritan comes to mind, as Jesus walks alongside his friends. As he looks around and sees right in front of him those who have suffered too much contempt. As he walks alongside those who have known too much scoffing from others. As he sings and prays with those whose very life-force feels so incredibly drained.

Oh, mercy, mercy me, Jesus sings for us all on his way to Jerusalem. As he lifts up his eyes to the heavens. As he prays with attentive readiness for God to guide his next steps. As he prepares himself to spring into action in the Holy Week to come. In the temple. At the table. From the tomb, where God's mercy spares and heals and lifts him up so he can spare and heal and lift up the world.

Oh, mercy. Mercy me.

This power of compassion to spare and heal and renew and restore life when by all rights you could destroy it, this power, as Shakespeare says, is in fact the greatest power there is! An attribute of God's very self. Mightiest in the mightiest. Like gentle rain falling from heaven ...

Like the river of the water of life flowing from the covenant of our baptism. This power of compassion is the greatest power there is: from everlasting to everlasting, the last word of God fixing us, healing us, holding us, reviving us whenever we find ourselves broken and battered on the other side of the road.

Oh, mercy, mercy me. This psalm now becomes our fervent prayer in our own confrontation with the misuse of the power of numbers combined with weapons. In our own confrontation with the seeming impotence of religious and political power. Mercy, mercy us, we must pray for the ultimate power: to be given the grace to spare, to heal, to lift up the life of the one we think of as our enemy. To be given the grace to do so even when – and especially when – we think they do not deserve it.

O mercy, mercy me. Mercy, mercy, you. Mercy, mercy us. This psalm now becomes our fervent prayer: to become, as the Prince of Soul said so beautifully, impeccable warriors. In the yoga sense of that word: attentive and ready. With the knowledge and power this good earth – this good GOD – has given us gives us. To join with God in healing the world. With our patience untiring and our courage unflinching.

Amen.