

Longing For Mercy
First Sunday of Advent
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‘Longing for mercy’ – you will not find the word mercy anywhere in the lectionary passages for this First Sunday of Advent – what we do find though is the fabric of mercy, the need and longing for the substance of mercy woven throughout these passages. And in order to see and feel that fabric of mercy, what needs to become clear to us is that mercy is a weak word – mercy is an expression of weakness. It is certainly so for the one who is seeking mercy, longing for it – because mercy is an awareness, a confession, of depending on another for one’s well-being – mercy is the realization that you are not in control of the outcome of your circumstances. The need for mercy at times marks a point of desperation – mercy can be connected to violence: a plea for mercy when someone can do harm, a matter of life and death, a point of pivotal decision – one’s fate completely in the hands of another. Perhaps those are extreme cases, but it gives the sense of desperation present in longing for, seeking mercy – things are not in your control.

That’s the fabric and feeling found in Isaiah 65. The voice we hear in that passage addresses God with a combination of longing, fear, confession and need – and as this voice speaks out to God, along with it you get the picture of the powers of the world as a source of threat. This is the voice of one not in charge, not in control, when it comes to the powers of this world, and so in some sense you could say it is one who comes to God with no choice – God is the one power left to turn to; or you could say that it is a voice of faith that sees God as the only enduring choice when you see the fickle nature of power in this world: faith is to put oneself at God’s mercy and say, ‘do with me what you will’: ‘you O LORD are our Father – we are the clay, you are the potter – we are all the work of your hand.’

Then put Psalm 80 alongside Isaiah and it is remarkable how the 2 passages reflect and echo one another: the Psalm is a song of those who see they are not the masters of their destiny – the power of the world is not their salvation; they must turn to God: ‘save us - give us life!’

‘You are the potter; we the clay’ says the prophet; ‘restore us, O God’ says the Psalmist – a voice that comes out of the wisdom of knowing one’s weakness – in need of mercy.

What we find in Isaiah and the Psalm is taken further yet in the Gospel of Mark – as Jesus speaks he paints a bleak picture of a world in turmoil; and it is turmoil that you can’t extricate yourself from or resolve on your own – the only answer given is the kingdom of God: ‘the Son of Man coming in power’, Jesus says. That is a word of fulfillment, of God’s power promised as completion – but for now what Jesus speaks of is tumultuous; and that speaks to our weakness not only with the powers of this world beyond our control, but also that the fulfillment of God’s kingdom is not ours to control either – ‘No one knows that time’, Jesus says – so what is left for us to do?: ‘be alert; be awake’ – put yourself at God’s mercy, really – it is a position of weakness, one’s hope and well-being in the hands of another.

So mercy is a weak word - but not only in the one seeking it – no, to give mercy is an expression of weakness too. To offer mercy to another is to give up power, to give up rights, to give up a choice. The act of mercy given is to give up power over, and instead offer release; it is to not determine the fate of another but to open up freedom for another – and in that sense it is weakness; it gives up control. What is one asking of God when the plea is for mercy? what does it mean to say: ‘I place my life in your hands, God – have mercy’? It is to have faith in the weakness of God – that God will respond to longing and fear and confession and need...with grace, love, forgiveness; with faithfulness, presence, fulfillment.

When we start to get a feel for what mercy is about, we see it is a fabric formed of weakness on all sides – and so we get a sense of why mercy is not in the common lexicon for our world. Mercy is not how the powers of this world operate – politics, economy, leaders, religions; with such powers, vulnerability cannot be expressed or given; weakness cannot be shown. Instead there is the will to shape others, to impose control, to claim hold of power – that power can come with many names and forms: rule, force, wealth, law, violence, might, fear, even truth (maybe especially, truth). And those names and forms of power show no mercy to those in their way.

What mercy gives voice to is something outside of the structures of power in this world – mercy longed for gives voice to the desire for something different to live by than the way we see power expressed around us – and when we look to God, we wait for an answer: is God a God of mercy? - or is God just a collection, reflection, of the powers of this world, only more so? The answer to our Advent longing is the call of a God of mercy; which is to say, a revelation of God's weakness: God comes not to destroy or control, but to release and renew – Emmanuel, God with us – mercy. I think that's what we hear in Corinthians – the assurance that God is faithful; a God of grace in the gift of Christ – the revelation that God can be trusted – the heavens ARE torn open: God gives life and God IS mercy.

But what that makes me think, in a striking twist on things, is that when we speak of 'longing for mercy', we are also speaking of a longing in God about us. When we read in Corinthians that 'God will strengthen you' – it is God equipping the faithful to live differently than the powers of this world; it is God strengthening us for mercy, for weakness – to live in God's mercy and to share that gift in faithful living. A church about mercy - the church as a witness to weakness: that is not always our strength in the church; but that is our calling - for the church to be a

witness that we are not in control or in power, but rather are in the hands of a faithful God who longs for us too to live in mercy – using power for, rather than power over.

As we look around and see turmoil in the streets of Ferguson, Missouri – a young black man dead, a community torn, a nation in dis-ease; as we see a world in which there is little distinction between religion and violence; as we see powers aligned to serve the few rather than to give justice to many...what is needed? Mercy, mercy, mercy – something different than the structures of this world – different than win/lose, over/under – different than rule, force, wealth, law, might, fear, truth; instead the voice of mercy, of vulnerability, of weakness, as the strength of God that speaks life. As we look in our own lives, wrestle with relationships, choices, brokenness – we are called there too to live in mercy – a way of grace that is different than the patterns around us, and within us.

Longing for mercy: what we seek, and find, in our God, our God seeks and calls out too in us: the Spirit of Christ to shape, mold mercy within us – ‘you are the potter, we are the clay’- ‘restore us, O God.’ ‘Lord, have mercy – Christ, have mercy – Lord, have mercy’ – by God’s grace may the cry of our hearts be the shape of our lives. Mercy is a weak word – at this table, our Lord gives us the strength so to live - thanks be to God. Amen.