

Ash Wednesday Sermon, February 25, 2009

The Rev. Robin Gulick

From JFWs class I first learned the word “hesed.”

Why ashes:

During Old Testament times, covering yourself with sackcloth and ashes was a sign of repentance and mourning

Putting ashes on ourselves gives liturgical expression to the text.

Traditionally been a day when public penitents were admitted to their penitential discipline so they might be readmitted to communion before Easter. With the end of public penance, penitential exercises were adopted by entire congregation. Ash Wednesday became like the Christian Yom Kippur – a day of atonement of fasting and penitence for sin. (4)

[The service] reminds us “that we stand before God as sinners doomed to die, and that it is only through God’s mercy that we can hope for anything else.” (4)

From Mitchell:

“The paschal mystery of the dying and rising of Jesus Christ and our participation therein is the theological core of the gospel, and its liturgical celebration is the central event of the church year.” (xv)

“The Great Vigil of Easter with the celebration of the paschal sacraments of baptism and Eucharist, is at its core and is its organizing theme, but the Easter cycle encompasses everything from Ash Wednesday through Pentecost. Its theme is the salvation of the human race through the mighty acts of Jesus Christ. In its celebration we become participants in those mighty acts and enter into the risen life of Christ.” (xvi)

Reflections on Psalm 103 drawn from Walter Brueggeman’s book: *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*.

And later from Psalm 51

Make me hear of joy and gladness,
That the body you have broken may rejoice.”

“In Psalm 103, the burden of guilt and the relentlessness of death are still present but are now qualified by God’s hesed, which is the true “good.” Now the psalmist knows what it means that God “satisfies you with good as long as you live” (Ps 103:5). The “good” might be good material things; in the end, however, the true good is God’s own self known through God’s own hesed.” (Brug 210)

About the use of words like hesed:

“These words make clear that God’s power for life in the face of death is not at work from a safe distance, but is evidenced in the midst of Israel’s life and therefore at cost and with risk. The God who works wonders in creation is the God who may, in faithful love, transform chaos into ordered life. The God who works wonders is the one who enters the prison cell with news, who touched blind eyes with healing, who risks sore wounds in order to be present for health. This is not to say that God is not powerful and sovereign, but it is power and sovereignty completely recast as urgent, determined solidarity. At every place in life where praying Israel yearns for wholeness, Israel notices

Yahweh also there yearning. At every point where praying Israel enters into deep grief over failed life, it finds grieving Yahweh there for it in terms of pathos. Israel prays from that strange conviction of sovereign relatedness and prays back to that same sovereign relatedness.” (Brug 45)

Psalms 103 is a song of praise. Yet we hear of our sin and iniquity and of finitude and death.

“We are guilty and we are headed towards death. This prayer speaks out of the human reality of sin and death, which might in some way restrain or sober the gladness [of the psalm of praise]. These deep human realities, however, are submitted to the reality of God, and, once submitted, they are overwhelmed by the stronger reality of God. Yahweh’s *hesed* overrides that which might cause anguish.” (Brug 52)

Look for instance at how verses 8 and 11 embrace and hold verses 9 and 10: *hesed* overpowers the reality of our sin

The LORD is full of compassion and mercy, *
slow to anger and of great kindness.

He will not always accuse us, *
nor will he keep his anger for ever.
He has not dealt with us according to our sins, *
nor rewarded us according to our wickedness.

For as the heavens are high above the earth, *
so is his mercy great upon those who fear him.

“The twin human problematics [of sin and death] are set in the presence of Yahweh’s *hesed*. Israel needs linger no longer over its sense of inadequate self. Israel’s praise draws Israel well out beyond itself to lodge its life in Yahweh, whose *hesed* is not diminished or restricted by human problematics. In its praise, Israel prays well beyond itself, utterly sure of God’s goodness that overrides and transforms.” (Brug 53)

“Guilt is acknowledged in this psalm, in utter confidence of God’s willing capacity to override guilt and not let it determine the outcome of life.” (Brug 200)

Likewise, the Psalm handles the problem of death and finitude. “Even the righteous die. Life is fragile and brief; human persons cannot be righteous enough to prolong life beyond the length of days. There is in fact nothing about the human enterprise that can answer or resolve the reality of death....Nothing can overcome that reality, except God’s sovereign attentiveness.” (Brug 201)

God’s *hesed* is everything. That *hesed* overrides, contextualizes, and transforms guilt and finitude. Even knowing its own true circumstance [of sin and death] Israel can trust, praise, sing and hope.” (Brug 202)

“No wonder Psalm 103 begins and ends with a litany of blessing stated as though Israel’s daring speech could possibly enhance the one who needs no enhancement...If one were to ask the Israelite who is singing if the intent is to enhance God, the answer would surely be, ‘Oh, I must sing. I intend nothing either towards God or toward us. I simply must sing. I must sing because the reality of God outdistances all my capacity for intentionality. I must sing.’” (Brug 54)

From Claus Westermann

His take on the psalm

“You infinitesimally small human, do not forget what connects you little life to the mighty dimension of eternity. Praise, praise with all your being the eternal God for sending fatherly goodness into you life; for somewhere and in some way your life participates in something which is in sharp contrast with human frailty: the steadfast love of the Lord.” (CW 9)

- 1
Bless the LORD, O my soul, *
and all that is within me, bless his holy Name.
- 2
Bless the LORD, O my soul, *
and forget not all his benefits.
- 3
He forgives all your sins *
and heals all your infirmities;
- 4
He redeems your life from the grave *
and crowns you with mercy and loving-kindness;
- 5
He satisfies you with good things, *
and your youth is renewed like an eagle's.
- 6
The LORD executes righteousness *
and judgment for all who are oppressed.
- 7
He made his ways known to Moses *
and his works to the children of Israel.
- 8
The LORD is full of compassion and mercy, *
slow to anger and of great kindness.
- 9
He will not always accuse us, *
nor will he keep his anger for ever.
- 10
He has not dealt with us according to our sins, *
nor rewarded us according to our wickedness.
- 11
For as the heavens are high above the earth, *
so is his mercy great upon those who fear him.
- 12
As far as the east is from the west, *
so far has he removed our sins from us.
- 13
As a father cares for his children, *
so does the LORD care for those who fear him.
- 14
For he himself knows whereof we are made; *
he remembers that we are but dust.

15

Our days are like the grass; *
we flourish like a flower of the field;

16

When the wind goes over it, it is gone, *
and its place shall know it no more.

17

But the merciful goodness of the LORD endures for ever on those who fear him, *
and his righteousness on children's children;

18

On those who keep his covenant *
and remember his commandments and do them.

19

The LORD has set his throne in heaven, *
and his kingship has dominion over all.

20

Bless the LORD, you angels of his,
you mighty ones who do his bidding, *
and hearken to the voice of his word.

21

Bless the LORD, all you his hosts, *
you ministers of his who do his will.

22

Bless the LORD, all you works of his,
in all places of his dominion; *
bless the LORD, O my soul.