

## Proper 23 A 2017

### Introduction.

With the exception of the Bible readings, hymns, and sermon, our service is essentially the same from one Sunday to the next.

Except also, that is, for the Collect of the Day. It's a special prayer near the beginning of each service, that's different each week, and which sets the tone for our worship, or provides a theme for our worship.

And it can be easy to overlook.

Today's collect has always been a favorite of mine. Let's hear a portion of it again:

“Lord, we pray that your grace may always precede and follow us, that we may continually be given to good works...”

I love that “precede and follow” language.

I love the notion that God's grace can go before us, and follow after us. That God's grace can be all around us; supporting us, as we move through life.

And the image that comes to mind is that of inner-tubing down the Guadalupe River north of San Antonio, back when I was a teenager. A slow, meandering journey that's calm, peaceful, and serene. That's how I imagine God's grace to *feel* like.

But what does God's grace *look* like?

We get a hint from a couple of our readings.

### Isaiah 25: 1-9.

In our reading from Isaiah, the prophet has been talking to an Israel that has been trusting *God* less and less, *and other* things more and more, for their security and their success.

And despite the prophet's warnings, the people of Israel don't seem to buy into the fact that their choices will result in the destruction of their nation.

But in today's reading, the prophet brings some good news. And that is, since God's covenant with Israel is everlasting, their nations' destruction will *not* be the end of their story.

And Isaiah tells them that, even though they have chosen to follow a path that leads to destruction, God will nevertheless enable the people of Israel to eventually be restored.

In our reading this morning — in the promise of God to restore Israel — we get a glimpse of what God's grace looks like:

That God is a refuge for the poor-and-needy in their distress.

That God provides shelter and shade, and a feast, for all people.

That God is the end of death, and tears, and disgrace.

The message here being that, even though Israel may break faith with God, God never breaks faith with Israel.

That's God's grace.

### **Psalm 23.**

And then, in our psalm, the author is reiterating our grace-filled relationship with God, by comparing it to the relationship of a shepherd to his (pretty much clueless) sheep.

And specifically, in this psalm, we learn:

That God *provides for us* when we're in need.

That God *revives us* when we're faint.

That God *accompanies us* when we're alone.

That God *assures us* when we're uncertain.

These are also examples of God's grace.

## **Bridge.**

And from these examples, we can get an idea of what the Prayer Book means, when it describes God's grace as

“God's favor towards us, unearned and undeserved” (BCP, 858).

And then, our Prayer Book goes on to describe the *function* of God's grace. That through grace

“God forgives our sins, enlightens our minds, stirs our hearts, and strengthens our wills” (BCP 858).

In other words, God's grace enables us to live life to its fullest.

And that takes us to our reading from Philippians.

### **Philippians 4: 1-9.**

In that letter, Paul is addressing a congregation that is being troubled by at least four different factions; and some are even *within* the congregation.

And because of the presence of these four groups, the members of that congregation are under a lot of stress, and are having a hard time getting along with one another.

And so, in our reading, Paul reminds them, first, that God *is* the source of their joy, thanks, and peace.

And, second, that God is *not* the source of any unpleasantness that may be going on around them.

And then, Paul offers them some advice:

That, rather than focusing on the *unpleasant* things going on around them, instead they should focus on

those things that are honorable, just, pleasing, commendable, excellent, and praise-worthy.

In other words, don't focus on the negative things going on around them; instead,

focus on the positive things going on around them.

And don't just *focus* on those things, but also *do* those things.

In other words, our ability to tap into the grace of God, can often be found within ourselves; within our *attitudes*, and within our *actions*.

### **Bridge.**

Now, at this point, it would seem natural that I would want to include the reading from Matthew's gospel.

It's a passage widely known as "The Parable of the Wedding Feast."

But for those who are fans of the HBO series Game of Thrones, it could also be known as "The Parable of the 'Red Wedding.'"

But it's a very strange parable, and it would take a while to unpack. And I'm not sure it would add a lot to what we've already considered.

So, we're just going to ignore it.

### **Summation.**

So, what have we learned?

First, that God's grace is all around us.

Second, that God's grace isn't contingent on anything we do.

And, third, that God's grace is something that we can enable, or allow, to function in our lives by the attitudes we adopt, but especially by the things that we do.

For example, and from our reading from Isaiah, we learn that:

We can tap into God's grace by being a refuge for the poor-and-needy in their distress.

We can participate in God's grace by providing shelter and shade, and a feast, for all people.

That we can share God's grace by working to be the end of death, tears, and disgrace.

And our reading from Psalm 23, we learn that:

If God provides when we're in need, we should also strive to provide for others in their need.

That if God revives us when we're faint, then we should work to revive others when they're faint.

If God accompanies us when we're alone, then we should work to accompany others when they're alone.

And if God assures us when we're uncertain, then we should work to provide assurance to others when they're feeling uncertain.

And our reading from Philippians, we learn:

That in all the things we do and say, that we should strive to be the source of joy, thanks, and peace to those around us.

And in any community of faith, that means that we don't focus all our attention on the wrong someone has done, but rather we also try to focus our attention on any good they've done.

In other words, to tap into God's grace, to take advantage of God's grace, to be in God's grace:

We simply have to participate in the work that God is doing in the world.

We simply have to behave like human beings; like people created in the image and likeness of God.

And the best way to *experience* the grace of God, is by being the *conduit* through which the grace of God is transmitted to others.

God's grace, in other words, is not only something we receive, but it's also something we give.

Amen.