

Sermon for January 28, 2018 – 4th Sunday after Epiphany

Exodus 34:5-10 (Evangelical Heritage Version)

Theme: Let God's name be honored as holy. . .

- 1) by our trust in his gospel,
- 2) by our reverence for his law,
- 3) and by our lives as his children.

⁵The LORD came down in the cloud. He took his stand there with Moses and proclaimed the name of the LORD. ⁶The LORD passed by in front of him and proclaimed: "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, and overflowing with mercy and truth, ⁷maintaining mercy for thousands, forgiving guilt and rebellion and sin. He will by no means clear the guilty. He calls their children and their children's children to account for the guilt of the fathers, even to the third and the fourth generation." ⁸Moses quickly bowed to the ground and worshipped. ⁹He said, "If I have now found favor in your sight, Lord, please let the Lord go along with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, pardon our guilt and our sin, and accept us as your possession." ¹⁰The LORD said, See, I am making a covenant. In the presence of all your people I will do marvelous things such as have never been created anywhere on earth or in any nation. So all the people who are around you will see the work of the LORD. For it is an awe-inspiring thing that I will do for you.

Who, exactly, is the LORD? I know that the Bible defines him as the Triune God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Pretty much every Christian – regardless of their denominational affiliation - agrees on this point.

But who is the LORD in respect to us? Here is where various Christian denominations seem to offer wildly different interpretations. On the one hand, certain church bodies picture God as so severe and demanding that people are, in effect, taught that they can't just simply trust in the LORD's mercy to save them, but need to merit it by means of their own deeds. Other church bodies picture the LORD as so easy-going that it almost seems as if he doesn't care what sins you commit, so long as you don't hurt or judge other people.

Who's right and who's wrong? Does it even matter? To answer the last question first: yes, it most certainly does matter, because the Bible reveals God as being very protective of his reputation. As to who's right and who's wrong, let us listen to the LORD himself teach us both who he is and how he is disposed towards us, under the theme: **Let God's name be honored as holy. . . 1) by our trust in his gospel, 2) by our reverence for his law, 3) and by our lives as his children.**

Part One: Let God's name be honored as holy by our trust in his gospel

Our sermon text takes place about 40 days after God spoke the 10 commandments from Mount Sinai. At that time, the LORD made a covenant with the Israelites to be their gracious God and

deliver them to the promised land of Canaan. They, in return, would worship him alone and keep his laws. Even though the Israelites happily agreed to these terms, they broke the covenant God made with them by worshipping a golden calf at the foot of Mt. Sinai, while Moses was on the mountain – talking with the LORD.

Even though the LORD was very angry with Israel, He forgave their sin at Moses' request. This prompted Moses to ask the LORD to see his glory. The LORD promised that he would – but not in the way Moses would expect. Because the holiness of God's face is far too glorious for any mortal to handle, the LORD said that he would allow his goodness to pass in front of him as he proclaimed his holy name - all the while preventing Moses from seeing his face.

And this is where our sermon text comes in: ⁵*The LORD came down in the cloud. He took his stand there with Moses and proclaimed the name of the LORD.* ⁶*The LORD passed by in front of him and proclaimed: "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, and overflowing with mercy and truth,* ⁷*maintaining mercy for thousands, forgiving guilt and rebellion and sin.*

Notice that the first thing the LORD wants us to know about him is his compassionate, forgiving love. He is not some heartless, capricious god like the heathen worship, who has little care for his creation. No, he is the exact opposite. Want proof? Consider the first two things the LORD did after he had to confront Adam and Eve with their sin: he cursed the devil and promised a Savior. Throughout history you can see the LORD fulfilling his promise to provide that Savior – ever patient with his people, tender hearted to their cries and working in all things to reveal his saving love both to and through them.

Did you know that our sermon text's wonderful description of the LORD's mercy has been called the "John 3:16" of the Old Testament? Just as every Christian finds comfort in the famous New Testament Bible passage, "*God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.*"¹" so also Old Testament believers seemed to know and cling to the Lord's description of himself as "*the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, and overflowing with mercy and truth,* ⁷*maintaining mercy for thousands, forgiving guilt and rebellion and sin.* How do I know this to be true? Because this verse is quoted and alluded to throughout the Old Testament – indicating beyond any shadow of a doubt that the first thing the LORD wants us to know about himself is that he is our merciful God to whom we can always turn in repentance and faith. Don't be scared of him. Don't imagine your sins to be so great that he either can't or won't forgive them. Listen to what God says about himself and trust in his love. You see, the LORD not only claims to be mercifully disposed towards you, he proved it beyond any shadow of a doubt. How so? By dying on the cross in payment for your sins.

Yes, the Lord certainly is a most gracious God, whose name we hallow by simply trusting in his mercy. Not only that, but we also bring honor to his name by telling other people about his forgiving love, so that they too might be recipients of the amazing grace God offers.

Part Two: Let God's name be honored as holy by our reverence for his law.

Sadly, as great as God's mercy is, many people abuse it. How? By thinking that it gives them a license to live however they want, claiming, "God is love. God is forgiving. He doesn't care what you do so long as you don't hurt others." Nothing can be farther from the truth, as the LORD himself says:

He will by no means clear the guilty.

If you were to read this verse in its original language, you would see that the LORD uses the strongest term Hebrew allows to indicate that his forgiving love is NOT a license to sin. The LORD is holiness and justice personified. He won't just wink away sin. No, all sin must be paid for, which is exactly why He sent his only begotten Son into the world.

Understand, then, that Jesus didn't die on the cross so that we could continue pursuing sin. No, he saved us to pursue him and live as his dearly loved children. He saved us that we might honor his name by showing our reverence to his commands, which he gave for our benefit.

For this reason, *He will by no means clear the guilty* (those who would rather pursue sin than him in repentance and faith). *"He calls their children and their children's children to account for the guilt of the fathers, even to the third and the fourth generation."*

Now, understand that this verse is not saying that children will suffer in hell in payment for their father's sins. No, the Scriptures are clear: *The soul who sins is the one who will die. The son will not share the guilt of the father, nor will the father share the guilt of the son.*ⁱⁱ

What the LORD means, rather, is that sin has consequences that not only affect us, but those we love. Think of the thief who gets caught stealing. Is he the only one who suffers? No, his children have to suffer from his absence as he gets sent to jail. His grandchildren have to suffer the shame of being the descendants of a thief.

One of the best biblical examples of what the LORD means by visiting the sins of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation, is Israel's wandering in the wilderness: when the descendants of the generation that refused to obey God had to suffer the LORD's discipline of wandering 40 years in the desert, until the generation that rebelled had died out.ⁱⁱⁱ

The point is this: just because the LORD is mercy personified – willing to forgive all guilt, rebellion and sin - doesn't mean that he is "ok" with our breaking of his law. No, the LORD hates sin, which is one of the reasons he so mercifully saved us in Christ: He forgave our sins that we might belong to him.

For this reason, we honor God's name whenever we, in the peace of His forgiveness, keep the LORD's commandments and teach others to do the same. Whoever does not do this, however, brings dishonor to God's name and will suffer the LORD's eternal wrath if he doesn't repent of his ways.

Part Three: Let God's name be honored as holy by our lives as his children.

The LORD kept his promise to Moses. He allowed his glory to pass in front of him – revealing exactly who He is in relation to us. What was Moses’ response to all this?

⁸*Moses quickly bowed to the ground and worshipped. ⁹He said, “If I have now found favor in your sight, Lord, please let the Lord go along with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, pardon our guilt and our sin, and accept us as your possession.”*

Moses understood. He worshiped the LORD in fear and reverence – acknowledging God’s absolute holiness. At the same time, Moses also trusted in His mercy – asking the LORD to forgive Israel’s sin and adopt them as his people.

And in spite of how rebellious Israel had been towards the LORD – breaking the covenant the LORD made with them only a couple weeks earlier by worshipping an idol – the LORD listened to Moses. Not only did he promise to forgive their sin, but the *LORD said, See, I am making a covenant. In the presence of all your people I will do marvelous things such as have never been created anywhere on earth or in any nation. So all the people who are around you will see the work of the LORD. For it is an awe-inspiring thing that I will do for you.*

Yes, the LORD promised to do marvelous works for and through his people that others might see and wonder at God’s almighty power and mercy in their lives. The LORD would do this so that others might know him. He would do this to bring glory to his name.

And doesn’t the LORD still do this among us also – his people, whom he has adopted through Holy Baptism? Yes, he does – as the Scriptures say: *“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, the people who are God’s own possession, so that you may proclaim the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”*^{iv}

Brothers and sisters in Christ: Who is the LORD in relation to you? He is your loving, heavenly Father who is filled with such mercy, that he is willing to forgive any and every sin for Christ’s sake. He does this – not so that we can selfishly continue pursuing sin, but rather that we might live as his dearly loved children – glorifying his name through our words and actions. Let us remember this every time we pray the Lord’s prayer, asking the LORD to ever allow us is to hallow his name through *our trust in his gospel, reverence for his law, and our lives as his children.* Amen

ⁱ John 3:16 EHV

ⁱⁱ Ezekiel 18:20 NIV84

ⁱⁱⁱ Cf. Numbers 14:30-34

^{iv} 1 Peter 2:9