

HEBREW SCRIPTURE LESSON, Psalm 36:5-10

CEB

A song of celebration for God's unfailing love and care which includes all humanity and all of creation. (responsively)

36 ⁵ But your loyal love, LORD, extends to the skies;
your faithfulness reaches the clouds.

⁶ Your righteousness is like the strongest mountains;
your justice is like the deepest sea.

LORD, you save both humans and animals.

⁷ **Your faithful love is priceless, God!**

Humanity finds refuge in the shadow of your wings.

⁸ They feast on the bounty of your house;

you let them drink from your river of pure joy.

⁹ Within you is the spring of life.

In your light, we see light.

NEW TESTAMENT SCRIPTURE LESSON: 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

The gifts of the Spirit!

(CEB)

12 Brothers and sisters, I don't want you to be ignorant about spiritual gifts. ² You know that when you were Gentiles you were often misled by false gods that can't even speak. ³ So I want to make it clear to you that no one says, "Jesus is cursed!" when speaking by God's Spirit, and no one can say, "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit. ⁴ There are different spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; ⁵ and there are different ministries and the same Lord; ⁶ and there are different activities but the same God who produces all of them in everyone. ⁷ A demonstration of the Spirit is given to each person for the common good. ⁸ A word of wisdom is given by the Spirit to one person, a word of knowledge to another according to the same Spirit, ⁹ faith to still another by the same Spirit, gifts of healing to another in the one Spirit, ¹⁰ performance of miracles to another, prophecy to another, the ability to tell spirits apart to another, different kinds of tongues to another, and the interpretation of the tongues to another. ¹¹ All these things are produced by the one and same Spirit who gives what he wants to each person.

“Your loyal love, Lord, extends to the skies; your faithfulness reaches the clouds.” It’s what the psalmist wrote. It’s what we said together today. Let’s say that together one more time. “Your loyal love, Lord, extends to the skies...” (Psalm 36:5)

Take that in. Loyal love. Faithfulness. God...right *here*...right *now*...

Sometimes this is the most important thing in our world. Towers may crumble. Life might implode...fold in around us. Still, there is God. *Here* is God. With loyal love that extends to the skies.

Can you take this in? It’s for you! It’s for me! It’s for all of us here individually *and* as a community. The psalmist – with laser vision, better than 20-20 clarity – grabs a truth from eternity and pens it in Hebrew letters on scrolls protected year after year during hostile times of take over and years of peace, so that one day someone can translate it into English so that we can hear it in an understandable way this morning: Loyal love and Faithfulness has the Creator of the Universe and the Creator of your very being for you! But can you let this truth – this miracle of historically preserved, divinely inspired word penetrate into your very being and heal you? Let it enlighten you and mobilize you?

The world needs...you.

Years ago, Martin Luther King, Jr. let words like this penetrate him. How else could he accept a call to ministry? How else could he accept the role he took for justice -- a role that he most certainly know would cost him his life? How else would he be willing to use his gifts and graces in such an exposed, vulnerable, personally and familially dangerous way?

In the face of extreme prejudice and oppression, he presented the Gospel in our present past – the 1950s and 1960s – standing as a voice of God’s prophet to the US and to the world. Are we even that brave today?

But God gave him gifts, and he employed them to the glory of God, to do justice and to love kindness, and to walk humble with God." Do you know those words? The ones I just used about doing justice, loving kindness and walking humble with God? Those are from the prophet Micah (6:8). Martin -- reluctantly or boldly -- recognized his gifts as prophet, as orator, as writer, and his gifts of boldness, his ability to speak cross culturally, his infinite amount of patience combined with a persistence -- and he led us all toward our better selves -- which is an inner and an outer journey, by the way. He...used...his...gifts. Because he knew that God's loyal love was more vast then the sky that we can see -- even from an airplane, even from a spaceship.

What could *you* do if you let these words live in you like a seed, a plant that grows lush and healthy inside you offering of itself fruit and sustenance to a hungry world? What if *you* could let these words live in *you*?

Jesus understood these words in a way that few others have. He not only got them with his mind but he got them with his heart and with his soul. And he went out of his way, and risked his life, and lost his life, to teach people that God is Love. That God is the love they can hold onto in every storm of life.

Grab on. And ride out the storm with the One who loves you...who is faithful...who created you in God's image...who knows the you inside the you that sometimes you don't even know!

Do you think that's true? For some of us, that's easy.

But, for some of us, we do not even know who it is that we are or who it is that we are supposed to be in the world or who we are to become.

Yet, some say, "Life is God's gift to you; what you do with your life is your gift to God." There is a lot of truth in this statement. But the focus, the clarity, the bull's eye comes when we reflect on the words in our bulletin this morning which are standing in as the title of our sermon: Life isn't about finding yourself. It's about discovering who God created *you* to be."

Do you know yet *who* that is? Have you enjoyed the rewards of living fully into that expression?

Many in this lifetime will miss this important directive completely. They will wander about aimlessly likely doing good and ick at intervals, not necessarily knowing the one from the other. But people of faith have an advantage. We have the Bible that acts as a rudder and Jesus who sets the sails.

Paul understood this when he wrote to the Corinthians. They'd gotten a bit off course, you see. There were those who had gifts and graces bestowed upon them by God *but they* were totally engrossed and enamored with using them for their own profitability (as opposed to prophet-ability) and to puff themselves up so that others would say how grand they were. "Look at me! Look at me! Admire me! Elevate me!"

These impulses lead to a reward that begins and ends with the individual. But...what if...as Paul suggested...we used our gifts for the common good (1 Corinthians 12:7) *But what are your gifts?*

"God has planted greatness in you." To quote evangelist Joyce Meyers, "Let today be the beginning of a great adventure as you step into the gifts (God has) given you." And I want to ask you this morning, if not you...**then who?** If not us...**then who?** If not now...**then when?**

Almost 600 years ago, a nun, a mystic, a reformer by the name of Teresa of Avila shared this insight in a poem that has lasted to this very day. She wrote:

Teresa of Avila (1515–1582)

Christ Has No Body

**Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.**

God loves you with a loyal love. God is faithful! So, what is your response? Are you living as part of Christ's body in the world? If not you...then who? If not us...then who? Will we let God's loyal love and faithfulness sustain us as we live out our callings? Or will we let it fall...silent...unfulfilled...wasted.

As Paul said in his letter to the Corinthians this morning:

"⁴ There are different spiritual gifts but the same Spirit; ⁵ and there are different ministries and the same Lord; ⁶ and there are different activities but the same God who produces all of them in everyone." (1 Corinthians 12:4)

So, whatcha doin' with those gifts? Watcha doin' with those ministries? Whatcha doin' with your different activities?

I'd like to tell you a story I came across on Facebook. It was sandwiched between an adorable video of a house trained porcupine and a dog who plays the piano and sings. Both of which were immensely entertaining and heart-warming.

But this story was more than entertaining. It was rich and challenging. So, I'm going to invite you to listen to it to hear where the gifts and graces show up.

This is the story about a harried mother with a fussing infant, a young school aged child, an elderly woman and a cashier at Target. Says the writer, named Sara, who is also the Mom in this story:

"Yesterday (my husband) Matt was sick. I picked up (our baby) Archie from the sitter and Eloise from (grade) school and decided to run to Target for a few things. I had hoped to be in and out quickly.

I found a line with just one person ahead of me and began organizing my items on the conveyor. After placing my items, I look up to see that the person ahead of me was an elderly woman. She was paying for her items with change and wanted to purchase each separately. Part of me, the part that had a long day at

work, the part of me who had a 1½ year old having a meltdown in the cart, the part that had set an unnecessary timeline for Target and getting home, was frustrated with this woman and the inconvenience she had placed on me.

BUT then I watched the young employee with this woman. I watched him help her count her change, ever so tenderly taking it from her shaking hands. I listened to him repeatedly say, ‘yes, ma’am’ to her. When she asked if she had enough to buy a reusable bag, he told her she did and went two lines over to get one for her and then repackaged her items. Never once did this employee huff, gruff or roll his eyes. He was nothing but patient and kind.

As I was watching him, I saw that Eloise was too. She was standing next to the woman, watching the employee count the change. I realized I hadn’t been inconvenienced at all. That my daughter was instead witnessing kindness and patience and being taught this valuable lesson by a complete stranger; furthermore, I realized that I too needed a refresher on this lesson.

When the woman was finished, the employee began ringing up my items and thanked me for my patience. I then thanked him for teaching us patience and kindness by his treatment of that elderly woman. And, although my timeline for Target was askew, when he was finished I pushed my cart through the store trying to find the manager. I wanted her to know of the employee’s kindness and patience, and how much it meant to me. After tracking her down and sharing the story with her, we left Target with a cart full of consumable items, but what is more, a heart full of gratitude for such an invaluable lesson.

If you are ever in the Glendale Target, give Ishmael a smile and a nod. The world could use more people like him.”

Spiritual gifts of patience and kindness...Whether you are an employee at Target...or the Lead guy/gal in a mega-corporation, how will you use your gifts today? Will you use your gifts today? We all have these different gifts! Many gifts; one Spirit.

You are being loved up by the Creator of the very Universe who is simply loving you up for *you*. But it’s for each of us to decide – or maybe I should say, it is for each of us to be *convicted* – that *Christ has no body but ours*, and then to ask the obvious question: *What are we to do with our gifts, our graces, all with which God has endowed each and every one of us?*

Someone once said, “If you’re *breathing*, God has a *purpose* for *you*. As long as you have breath, *somebody* needs what you have. *Your* gifts, *your* talent, *your* love, *your* smile.”

Martin Luther King, Jr. was called to be who he was. He did so admirably with all of his own imperfections. In 1957, having surely meditated long and hard on Jesus’

words of unconditional love -- which is no small feat, by the way -- Martin said to a gathering:

Love is creative and redemptive. Love builds up and unites; hate tears down and destroys. The aftermath of the ‘fight with fire’ method, which you suggest is bitterness and chaos; the aftermath of the love method, is reconciliation and creation of the beloved community. Physical force can repress, restrain, coerce, destroy, but it cannot create and organize anything permanent; only love can do that. Yes, love—which means understanding, creative, redemptive goodwill, even for one’s enemies—is the solution to the race problem.

—Martin Luther King, Jr., 1957

That was Martin’s gift...to *us* in service to God's kingdom here on earth as it is in heaven. What’s yours? Many gifts! One Spirit! “Life isn’t about finding yourself. Life is about discovering who God created you to be.”

How about during this time of Epiphany; this time of revelation; this time of “AHA” – how about if you reflect and pray and discern more about who it is that God created *you* to be?

What if you were to journal it? Or take a note on your bulletin? Or put a thought on a post it note on your bathroom mirror? Or take a class this Lent? Or sing in the choir for a while to reflect on the wonderfully thoughtful, sacred lyrics of musicians? Or apply yourself to ministry and outreach?

To summarize where we began this morning:

1. God loves us with a loyal love and faithfulness that is beyond measure and beyond what we can fully fathom.

2. *We* are Christ’s body in this world. *We* are the arms, legs and hands. The mouth and the ears. *We* are each uniquely gifted by the Holy Spirit. And *we* are in a time of *Epiphany*, of *revelation*, of *AHA*. Will you waste this time? Or will you embrace it? You are on a journey! *Take it!*

Blessings on the journey. Amen.