

GOD'S INCOMPARABLE NATURE IN GRACE AND STEADFAST LOVE

Hear again the Word of God for this third Sunday after the Feast of the Holy Trinity:

Who is God like You, forgiving iniquity and passing over transgression for (the) remnant (of) His inheritance? His anger does not remain forever; for He delights in mercy.¹

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ

The Old Testament text for this day consists of three verses as the ancient Israelites numbered them. Only thirty-seven Hebrew words hold God's mysteries hidden until the Advent through Ascension of the Christ. They declare, for those willing to hear, God's incomparable nature in grace and steadfast love. Christ's coming, His dying, His rising from the dead, His Ascension, and His sending the Holy Spirit make clear the divine reality that the words of Micah were given to reveal to the faithful the eternal will of God. His will for His people is clearly stated with these words:

Who is God like You, forgiving iniquity and passing over transgression for (the) remnant (of) His inheritance? His anger does not remain forever; for He delights in mercy.²

The prophet Micah wrote those words in the ancient kingdom of Judah at about the same time as the prophet Hosea was writing in the northern Kingdom of Israel. With conservative dating, that text has stood without error since 725 B.C. Micah's God-breathed words came at the time when the kingdom to his North, Israel, was set to fall and go into captivity. His words are warnings to the people, the remnant of the southern kingdom, that the end of their northern relatives would be their end, if they did not sorrow over their sins and will to turn from them. His words were to be heeded as a

clear call to repentance: that God might give forth from His nature – proclaimed out of His declared will - forgiveness and salvation to His repentant people. You have heard repeatedly the verse that states God’s nature begin:

Who is God like You?

The prophet may have selected that phrase as a play on his own name, which means, “Who is like?” Or, he may have had no such intention, and any coincidence is due to our understanding. The significance of the introductory verse comes in the full question, “Who is God like You?” The answer is understood by the faithful to be, “there is no god like You, O Lord.” True believers know, as God has given us the Truth, revealing it to us through His Spirit, that all other gods of this fallen creation do not hold perfectly the attributes and will of the One True God. Namely, that His nature is revealed in His will that He is continually “forgiving iniquity and passing over transgression for (the) remnant (of) His inheritance.” Since that is the revealed will of the One God, does that mean that His people, whom He has called by His Name, are free to transgress His Holy Law, and to continue to live in sin?

Let that not be! Just because God wills to forgive sinners, to pass over our transgressions, to cast them forever from His Presence, this does not mean that we are free to remain in unrepentant sin. The lesson from the unrepentant people of Judah, who had witnessed God’s burning anger in the destruction of Israel, and who had remained apart from the pure Word of God for another 136 years, is to be our Law lesson. God

¹ *Micah 7:18.*

does not teach; on account of His apparent slowness to punish evil, that He will never bring His wrath upon those who continue to reject His call to repentance. The people whose nation first heard the words of this day's text did not repent as a people, and their nation too was destroyed! Yet their destruction on account of their unrepentance does not put these words to the lie: "His anger does not remain forever; for He delights in mercy."

It is God's revealed will that He desires to grant mercy. This is further explained for us in Jesus' parable of the lost sheep. That shows that God, the Owner of the Lost Sheep in the parable, will seek out those who have wandered from His flock. He will go after them, through the means He chose, His Word and Sacraments, and He will bring them back.

However, the parable does not say that God will force the lost ones back into the flock. The lost sheep, sinners straying from the Word of God, must not reject His touch that brings them back. They are to recline in His Presence, and not fight His carrying them back on His shoulders. Believers are to learn that God's dealing with them under the Law is to train them in the ways of His righteousness. It is His dealing with them under the Gospel that brings their wills in harmony with His.

Your presence here today indicates that you have not rejected His call to repentance. While you daily sin much and need His forgiveness, you have what He has

² Micah 7:18.

offered, and He has again carried you here – on His shoulders. (See them outstretched on the cross)?

We believe this to be true for you for, after you had confessed your sins this morning in this Lord's Service; you heard God's mercy declared in His Word of Absolution. Now, perhaps, you may understand why the Catechism lesson for the week was chosen to be about the definition of confession? In particular, you are being called to know that God's joy over your sorrow over your sins and your willing to turn from them brings Him joy! From the parables, this means that you are free to participate in God's joy at one sinner's repentance – your will to turn from sin and walk in newness of life. And, you are to understand that the angel chorus resounds with joy whenever you confess your sins and receive absolution. Keeping that heavenly reality before your mind's eye might help you firmly believe that your *sins are thereby forgiven before God in heaven!*³ The words of the prophet Micah continue:

*He will turn. He will cause to have compassion. He will subdue our iniquities. Then You will cast in (the) depths of (the) sea all their sins.*⁴

Again, the nature of God is revealed to those who will believe. The first phrase, "He will turn," could be literally rendered, "He will repent." That is, God, when He has determined the need to pour out His wrath upon the unrepentant, will, in His time, when repentance is effected in the sinner, turn from His wrath. He will not keep beating one who has turned from sin with His holy, just and perfect fiery anger.

³ *Dr. Luther's Small Catechism*, "Confession and Absolution."

⁴ *Micah* 7:19.

The ancient faithful, when suffering on account of their, and others', sins, were to know that God would turn from wrath, His alien nature, to His merciful nature. The prophet declares that God will cause to have compassion on His people. That is, God will be the effective and efficient cause of mercy for those whose sins have been taken away.

He caused this mercy for the ancients, for you, and for all who will come into the flock of the Father, through the merciful, for us, withholding of compassion from His Son. In other words, God showed steadfast love and mercy to you when He poured out His wrath for a time upon His sinless Son Jesus. He bore the full brunt of God's eternal fiery wrath at sin, your sins, that you may receive mercy.

You know that to be true when you look upon the cross with the Crucified One hanging upon it. There you may behold your iniquities subdued. In His death, your sins were cast into the abyss, never to be remembered by God again. His Word is true, for you, in Christ Jesus, as you recall the fulfillment of these ancient words:

Then You will cast in (the) depths of (the) sea all their sins.⁵

That "then" is now. It is yours because God declares it to be so. The personal "You" of the prophet's words are given to the faithful to let them know forever that it is God who takes away sin, who leads to repentance, who removes guilt. Repentance and forgiveness is all God's work, and all your benefit! Again, you have heard God's reason for sharing in heaven's joy over your God-given ability to confess and receive absolution.

⁵ Micah 7:19b.

Are you able now to better understand, comprehend, and own the revealed mysteries of God in Holy Absolution? God has declared of Himself through Micah's prophecy:

*You will give Truth to Jacob, mercy to Abraham, which You swore to our fathers from days of ancient time.*⁶

From those words, the faithful understand that the Promise was given to the sinning people of Israel and Judah. The first name mentioned was Jacob. He is used by the prophet to represent the Covenant people of God under the bloodline of Jacob, living under the Torah (the Law and Gospel) of Moses. They were to receive Truth.

That they were given when the Truth, God incarnate, walked among them. He revealed the Father's will to forgive, and to recover those who wandered from the truth into sin. Jesus came first, as you know from the Scriptures, to the Jews of old, the people of Jacob's line.

But, you also know, that Jesus came for all the children of Abraham. That was foretold also by the prophet Micah, when he said, *You will give... mercy to Abraham.* The word translated "mercy" has a deep meaning, captured best, but still not completely, in the phrase, "steadfast love." God was saying that He would pour out His fatherly love upon all the descendants of Abraham. As Scripture elsewhere indicates, that is those who believe in the Christ, who cling to His faith, and find themselves accounted right with the Father through Jesus.

⁶ Micah 7:20.

Both the children of Jacob, and the children of Abraham, receive the steadfast love, mercy, and grace of God on account of a human bloodline. What that means is that it is the blood of Christ, poured out to quench the wrath of God against and on account of sin, which brings the oft-sinning people of God back into His inheritance. The very human, and yet divine, blood of the Son is that which moves you from God's wrath into God's joy. It is Christ's blood that unites you with the faithful of all times into the family, the flock, the everlasting community of the forgiven.

What this means is that whenever you are troubled by your sins, or suffering under the wrath of God on account of your people's sins, you are free to "cast your burden on the Lord."⁷ You may "empty yourselves under the mighty Hand of God, that all of you may be exalted in season."⁸ For by faith you know that there is no god like El (God),

forgiving iniquity and passing over transgression for (the) remnant (of) His inheritance. His anger does not remain forever; for He delights in mercy.⁹

The peace which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus

Trinity III (LSB One-year series)

Micah 7:18-20; I Peter 5:6-11; Luke 15:1-10

June 28, 2009

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⁷ Psalm 55:22a, *ESV*, today's gradual.

⁸ I Peter 5:1.

⁹ Micah 7:18.

Who is El like You, forgiving iniquity and passing over transgression for (the) remnant (of) His inheritance? Not it remains forever, His anger; for He delights in mercy.¹⁰

He will turn. He will cause to have compassion. He will subdue our iniquities. Then You will cast in (the) depths of (the) sea all their sins.¹¹

You will give Truth to Jacob, mercy to Abraham, which You swore to our fathers from days of ancient time.¹²

¹⁰ *Micah 7:18.*

¹¹ *Micah 7:19.*

¹² *Micah 7:20.*