

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany; February 12, 2023

Exodus 34:5-10

“We Work with Good Reason”

The LORD came down in the cloud. He took his stand there with Moses and proclaimed the name of the LORD. 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, maintaining 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 their fathers, even to the third and fourth generation.”

Moses quickly bowed to the ground and worshipped. He 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.”

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.

As labor markets began to tighten and workers became aware of how high demand was for them, a new phenomenon took hold, called “quiet quitting.” The name is a little misleading; workers don’t quit altogether, but they quit doing any more than their job requires. They leave their hearts at home. They’re out the door at 5 sharp. They accept no work that goes above and beyond. No one’s going to get fired for not working hard and late with the labor market this tight. So why do it, right?

At the same time that “quiet quitting” was catching on, another practice called “extreme super saving” was gaining more steam, too. Extreme super savers save every last penny they can. They do not pay any more for rent or food than they have too. They walk or bike to work. They do not travel on vacation. For ten or twenty years they forego all the extras that make life nice with the goal of retiring as soon as they possibly can. Scrimp and sacrifice heavily for a while to quit working forever as soon as possible.

Across the Pacific Ocean in Asia, in nations that once honored hard work and long hours, another practice has taken hold among younger workers. It is hard to translate from Mandarin, but it means something like “lying flat.” People who “lie flat” work a job until they have just enough saved up to quit. Then they go lie flat until they’re broke. Then they get a new job and save a little more, and then quit and return to the sofa...and repeat...and repeat.

What do all these new ideas and practices (which some would argue are old things with new names attached to them) have in common? The goal is to work as little and as lightly as possible, and to get away from work as fast as possible.

Moses climbed a mountain called Sinai. The Lord spoke to him for forty days and nights, and most of what the Lord said to Moses could be summarized like this: “Here, Moses. Here is how you and the Israelites will work for me. I brought you out of slavery in Egypt. I have brought you to this mountain. I will take you all the way to Canaan and give you that beautiful land. And now, here is how you work for me.”

It is important to note that the Lord was giving his rules for working for him to people who did not have a strong history of working hard for him. They were much better at quiet quitting and loud quitting (and every other kind of quitting) in their work for the Lord. They were much better at lying flat and standing up and screaming out loud in rebellion than they were at working for the Lord.

For example, this is actually the second time Moses is receiving the Lord's law, how he wants the Israelites to work for him. Because after Moses received the first set of tablets, he descended Sinai to find the Israelites in the middle of drunken, debauched worship of a giant gold calf. Imagine that! Moses comes down to tell them how to work for the Lord, and they've already quit!

The Israelites suffered a deep price for that rebellion. But the Lord did not give up on them. After disciplining them, the Lord called Moses back up the mountain to give him his law a second time, on a second set of tablets.

But this time, before Moses climbs down the mountain with the Lord's rules for working for him, the Lord preaches a sermon to him. It's not a long sermon, at least in terms of word count. But it is so rich in meaning that is rightly called, "The Sermon on the Name of the Lord."

The sermon begins with the Lord calling himself by name, and then repeating it. **"The LORD, the LORD..."** This name for God is the Hebrew word "Yahweh," which God usually uses to connect himself to his grace and his faithfulness. And he certainly does that in this sublime sermon. He preaches what is in heart of the Lord: **"The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, and overflowing with mercy and truth, maintaining mercy for thousands, forgiving guilt and rebellion and sin."**

The Lord is compassionate, which means feels the pain of others. When he first called Moses at the burning bush to lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, the Lord started by saying, "I've been watching. I know what my people have been through. I know how the Egyptians are hurting them." This is beyond wonderful! The eternal God is interested when we are hurting. Imagine God caring when you hurt! How many of your fellow humans really care when you're hurting? Five or ten out of eight billion? But the God who made us all does know and care.

The Lord next calls himself gracious. He gives good things we do not deserve. And that includes every good thing we have! Every breath and beat of the heart, every forkful of food and warm rush of heat out of the vent – to say nothing of all the things we enjoy above and beyond what we need – are all ours because he gives them graciously. No one of holds a receipt of service or funds rendered to God for which we deserve any of it – even life itself. It's all his grace.

The Lord is slow to anger. He never claims that his patience is infinite; it does eventually run out, which will become clear later in the Lord's sermon. But he waits. And waits. And waits. And waits for people to come around and turn to him in faith. Just look at how he is treating his Israelites, who quit on him in under forty days and started worshiping an Egyptian-style idol, the nation he saved them from! He forgives them, and takes them back, and calls them to work for him again!

The Lord is **"overflowing with mercy and truth."** While grace gives good things undeserved, mercy holds back punishment that is deserved. And the Lord is overflowing with mercy. When things overflow, it is seldom good news. From bathtubs to hot beverage cups to gas cans, the result is a pain in the neck at best, and maybe much worse. But picture the heart of God overflowing with mercy! What is the result? Those who have sinned against him and need his mercy have it flowing down onto them from heaven

above. And with his overflowing mercy comes his overflowing truth. Here in this Sermon on the Name of the Lord we find God's truth overflowing from his heart into the ears of Moses and onto the pages of Scripture for us. The truth that overflows from God's heart fills our hearts with joy, because it's the truth of his compassion and grace, his patience and mercy.

And God does not waffle or fade in the truth he speaks. He is **"maintaining mercy for thousands, forgiving guilt and rebellion and sin."** God does not roll out of bed one day feeling one way, and the next day another way. When he promises mercy and forgiveness, he sticks with it. His mercy and forgiveness are constant; they are also thorough: He forgives guilt. And rebellion. And sin. Those three words all have different shades of meaning, but they all come out in the same place. They all deserve condemnation. But God consistently and thoroughly maintains his mercy, so they all come out forgiven.

But God closes his own sermon making it clear that not everyone stands under his compassion, grace, patience, and overflowing mercy and forgiveness. **"He will by no means clear the guilty. He calls their children and their children's children to account for the guilt of their fathers, even to the third and fourth generation."** Those who turn away from the Lord in unbelief remain guilty in his eyes, and will be called to account. And once faith leaves a family, it is usually gone for good, spreading the guilt down through generations.

So should we see the close of the Lord's sermon on his own name as a low note to end on? Not for those who believe. It makes us all the more grateful that God is not only so good in himself, but has reached out and turned our hearts to him to believe what he says about himself, to save us from "being called to account for our guilt."

When the Lord's sermon has ended, Moses bows all the way to the ground and promises that from now on Israel will be his people. And that's when the Lord goes even farther. He has just finished preaching a sermon about himself, his own name. Now he says that he will prove his words are for real. He will prove what he has said about himself with what he will do for his people: **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.**

So the Lord has shown Moses and the Israelites – for the second time – how to work for him. But before he sends Moses down the mountain with his Law, the Lord says: I will work for you. I will work for you by proving the truth of all those amazing adjectives I just used to describe to myself.

And he did. For the Israelites, for the next millennium and a half, the Lord remained the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, overflowing with mercy and truth. And he proved it by working for them graciously, patiently, mercifully, and truthfully.

The Lord told Moses: This is who I am. And I prove it with my work. So now, take down to my people how they should work for me.

How do we work for the Lord? He tells us how, just as told the Israelites how to work for him. All we need to do is listen, and listen carefully. There is no need to wonder about what God wants us to do, his will for our lives, how we should work in his service. He does not expect us to keep the civil laws and worship laws that he gave to the Israelites, but he does expect us to keep his moral code. That is how we work for him. His Son sums it up for us like this: **"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and will all your soul and**

with all your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.” In the simplest summary, we work for God by showing love for him and everyone around us.

If we wish for a more in-depth analysis of how to work for him, he definitely goes into great detail about how to show love for him and our neighbor. But the purpose of the rest of this message is not so much the *how* to work for God. Because I wonder how many times each day a Christians confront situations where they genuinely wonder what the right thing to do is. We know that should show love for God by praising him and thanking him and worshipping him. We know how to show love for our neighbor: by helping them protect their property instead of swiping it, by building them up instead of gossiping about them, by encouraging them instead of insulting them, by showing humility instead of hubris. (And if you do encounter a situation where you genuinely don't know the right thing to do, give me a call. We'll find a Bible passage to help you. Or maybe the answer will be that there is no right answer in that situation, because there are many areas where God leaves us free to follow our own consciences.)

It is true that as our culture becomes more and more godless, Christians are becoming more confused about the *how*, about what God wants them to do, especially in areas like sexuality and handling money. But for the most part, our struggle is not with the *how*, what to do as we work for God. It's not so much *how*. It's *why*.

Why shouldn't I, as the Lord's servant, quietly quit and do the bare minimum? Why shouldn't I fade off into early retirement and do what I please for the rest of my life. Why shouldn't I lie flat and walk away from his work?

The Sermon on the Name of the Lord is short and sweet. It certainly does not tell us everything about the Lord. For instance, long before the Lord preached that sermon to Moses, he revealed something else about himself. At the burning bush, Moses asked the Lord, "When the Israelites ask me who sent me to be their leader, what should tell them?" And the Lord's answer was: **Tell them I AM has sent you.** The Lord's name is also I AM. He is constant and unchanging. So what the Lord preached about himself to Moses 3,500 years ago is still true.

There is a misconception that God changed somehow between the Old and New Testaments. This is not true. The Lord does not change. The Lord who preached about himself to Moses remains **"the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, and overflowing with mercy and truth, maintaining mercy for thousands"** who also **"by no means clear[s] the guilty."**

And he is still the God who backs up his words with his work. As he backed up everything he said to Moses with everything he did for the Israelites, he backs them up with everything he does for us, too.

The Lord told Moses, **"So all the people who are around you will see the work of the LORD. For it as awe-inspiring thing that I will do for you."** We have seen the Lord work for us. It is an awe-inspiring thing that he has done, and it proves everything he preaches about himself.

The still compassionate Lord saw our sinful misery, our condemnation, and cared. The still gracious God sent, unasked for and unearned, the gift – in the true sense of the word – of himself, his own Son to live and die for us. He is still the Lord who forgives guilt and rebellion and sin for the sake of Jesus' holy life and his death on the cross. In Jesus' work, the Lord will maintain his mercy to us when we leave this world. The punishment that we deserve, we will not ever see. Because he is still slow to anger and overflowing with mercy, he has been patient to forgive us every time we have failed to work for him as we should.

In his Son Jesus, the Lord has done awe-inspiring work for us and for all people. It proves that everything he preaches in his sermon on his own Name remains true, now and always.

And we know this is true because the Lord's heart is still **overflowing with truth**. He has sent his truth to us in Jesus Christ, who is the Word of God in the flesh. He has also sent us his truth and on the pages of the Holy Spirit's own book. The truth of his work for us overflows from his heart to ours, convincing us of all he has done for us.

And because God does not change, we know the work of Christ will stand for eternity and never fade away. No matter how many years have passed between the work of Christ in this world and the day you meet the Lord, you will meet him in the flesh, and meet him with dressed in Jesus' righteousness. Because the work of God for you in Jesus' holy life, death, and resurrection stand for eternity.

God gave Moses very good reasons why the Israelites should work faithfully for him. The reasons remain the same. God is so good. And he is so eternally good. He is the God who proves his goodness with his work; and that is why – the only reason we need – we work for him. Amen.