

Sermon Title: Cycling with God

Text: Psalm 123, Judges 4:1-7, 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

By: Rev. Terry Carty

Date: 11-13-11

Place: Kingston Springs United Methodist Church

Season: 22nd Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 28, Ordinary 33

Main Point: The cycle of redemption is sin-downfall-outcry-redemption. The downfall is the time when blame and judgement thrive, but we suffer. God is faithful even when humans are unfaithful, and God is willing to wait for the covenant people to recognize their need to cry out to their God for help before providing it. As children of light, we are lifting one another up toward redemption.

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Today's sermon is "Cycling with God." I have always loved things with wheels, so it would be easy to tell you wonderful stories about bicycling with God - melting the miles away by praying repetitive sentence prayers or Christian song lyrics in cadence with pedaling. I could also tell you of my adventures in the early days of my ministry when I did my pastoral visitation and carried communion to shut-ins on a motorcycle.

But that is not the cycling that I address today. I am talking about the cycle of redemption that God's people have known since the time of the first people. The reading from Judges is about the corruption and immorality of the Israelites, their abandonment by God to the hands of the Canaanites, their outcry after 20 years of oppression, and their redemption by the Judge Deborah and Barak.

This short story from Old Testament times sets up a cycle of redemption that even today's Jews know well - sin, downfall, outcry, redemption. Perhaps you recognize parts of this cycle in your own life or in that of someone close to you. Sin - separation from God, followed by downfall - a life in disarray, followed by outcry - a feeling of being so out of control that only a radical intervention can make living tolerable, followed by redemption - a ray of light, a break in the clouds, a feeling of hope, signs of improvement.

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This week I spoke with a friend who made me want to run away and hide. Her life has never been what she had dreamed for herself. With her twin sister, she was put up for adoption early in life. They had been born with special gifts, but also with special needs. As she grew up with her adoptive parents she only remembers wanting to be loved like other children, but she did not get that kind of love - and she found herself without friends. She dreamed of a time when she would be married to a wonderful husband and bear a beautiful family of love.

My friend has never found that love. With tears in her eyes she told me the story that I already know so well about her. Living alone. Resenting her deceased parents,

resenting her sister, resenting people who have husbands, envying people who have families to share holidays. A brilliant person who lives constantly in the outcry of a cycle seeking redemption.

My friend asks, "what have I done that is so bad that God would punish me this way?" Rationally she should know that those are the words of the Psalmists and the Hebrew people throughout their history. But she was simply born into a life that was loaded against her. She is God's person and has faithfully prayed for redemption from a life without human love. Now she cries out. She is consumed with judging those who have what she has not and with blaming God for her plight.

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I want for her what she wants for herself. I want her to know human love. But, while she is not hard to love, she is hard to be around. I want to be a good Christian brother and build her up. I want to find the words that encourage her. I want her to not lose all hope. I want her to find redemption.

But she is lost in an endless swirl of that Old Testament cycle of redemption that only results in temporary redemption. It goes this way: people begin to enjoy some relief from suffering and want more creature comfort. They take advantage of whatever comforts they have in sinful excess. Then they begin their downfall stage. That is when they begin to wonder what they have done to deserve this. It is near the bottom of their downfall when they realize that only God can help. Then, on their way back, they never reach full redemption before the cycle starts anew.

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Paul's letter to the Thessalonians shows us that God does not want us to suffer this endless cycle. That is why Jesus came to bring salvation - redemption. The Israelites could never see themselves as holy apart from their sacrifices and rituals. They considered God to be a roller coaster operator.

The darkness of believing in an evil humanity and a vengeful God throws us into the endless cycle of darkness with an occasional glimpse of sunrise. The life of Christ and all those who have followed him give us the hope that the cycle is broken and God is lifting us above that which causes suffering.

Jesus came to show us the light that has no darkness. Paul says that in Christ we belong to the day. The cycle is broken so that we can keep our eyes on one who lived among us and whose Holy Spirit still lives with us. God did not allow us to be born to suffer, but to have life abundant.

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If we have this faith, what are we going to do about it? Paul says “Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.” We are, in fact, encouraging and building each other up - at least we are doing that when it doesn’t get too hard on us.

I cannot run away from the troubled life of my friend. I must continue to help her see the glimpses of sunlight and praying that she will find constant light. I must not turn away from her to a false state of my own peace and safety.

It is when we respond to the outcry of others that God lifts us all above the darkness. If we run away from that recurring cycle in someone else, then we may very well be lulled by a false sense of peace and safety. We may still be in our own recurring cycle.

Where do we hear the outcry of others in our lives this week? This day? Can we take our attention off our own outcries? Can we live in the faith that our response to those outcries lifts us beyond our own downfall?