

December 30, 2007
Christmas 1

"Measuring the Kindness of the Lord with a Full Cup"

ISAIAH 63:7-10

I will tell of the kindnesses of the LORD, the deeds for which he is to be praised, according to all the LORD has done for us-- yes, the many good things he has done for the house of Israel, according to his compassion and many kindnesses. ⁸ He said, "Surely they are my people, sons who will not be false to me"; and so he became their Savior. ⁹ In all their distress he too was distressed, and the angel of his presence saved them. In his love and mercy he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.

I am holding in my hand a measuring cup. How would you measure your life this past year? How has the health been? Half full, three quarters, full to the brim, almost empty? How are the finances? Do you see a full cup with bills paid and money put into savings? Or maybe the unexpected bills leave your cup only quarter full as the year comes to an end. Let's measure you relationships with other people, your marriage, your family, old friends and new friends. Are we right there up to the top, has little changed, or has it been a rough year and your cup looks almost empty?

Now let's take this cup and measure the kindness of the Lord brought to our attention by the words just read to you from Isaiah. As we measure the Lord's faithfulness to his, and his salvation, and his compassion for us, we do not see a cup that is half empty or even half full, but always overflowing, 365 days a year, 24/7. Let's do some measuring this morning as we look at the kindness of the Lord this past year and anticipate more of the same for 2008.

Measure faithfulness

Isaiah says, "I will tell of the kindness of the Lord, the deeds for which he is to be praised, according to all that the Lord has done for us--yes, the many good things he had done for the house of Israel, according to his compassion and many kindnesses." The prophet Isaiah calls on us to recall and talk about how the Lord has shown kindness to us at the highest level. The word for "kindness" is the Hebrew word "chesed." It is used hundreds of times in the Old Testament to show us how faithful and loyal the Lord has been to us. This word is translated as "mercy" in the King James Version, and "steadfast love" in the NIV. It has the meaning of loyalty and faithfulness. Personally I prefer the steadfast love concept over mercy because it more accurately reflects the meaning of the word and how it is used in the Old Testament.

We come across this word "chesed" in Psalm 23 where it says, "Goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our lives." Notice the emphasis on loyalty with the words "all the days of our lives." It is also found in Lamentations 3 where it says that the Lord's mercies are new to us every morning, great is his faithfulness. Or then there is Psalm 103 that says that the Lord is compassionate and gracious abounding in love. The emphasis is again on the loyalty and faithfulness of the Lord.

Here are some examples of loyalty on a human level that help us appreciate the superior unflinching love of the Lord. "Jonathan asked King David to show kindness and loyalty (chesed) to his family if he died. Jonathan died, and David kept his word. Rahab the harlot asked the spies to show kindness to her family when God's people conquered the land. Joshua kept his word and spared Rahab and her family. Did you hear what 17 year old Carlos Sousa did for his friends when they were attacked by a Siberian tiger that escaped from the San Francisco zoo? Instead of running away to save himself when the tiger attacked, he ran to his friends and tried to scare the tiger away. It killed him, slashing his neck with its sharpened claws. His friends are alive and recovering in a hospital. What this young man did for his friends captures the meaning in this Hebrew word "chesed." Marines greet each with "Semper Fi" which stands for "Semper Fideles" (Always Faithful). Firemen train during the week, lifting weights and running to stay in good shape so they can carry another fireman from a burning building if that were necessary. It is part of being faithful.

Have you ever noticed that some people are not very faithful in the way they do their work? They may cut corners and cost the company lots of money. They may not be as nice to each other as they should be as husbands or wives, or children and parents or brothers and sisters. That is why there was once a bumper sticker, "The more I work with people, the more I want to be home with my dog." People let us down, dogs are always there to greet us at the door and even give their lives for us if necessary.

It is easy to think of people who are not faithful, but what about your life and mine. As we close another year of life on this earth we can look back and see where we were not faithful. We had opportunities to show love and kindness to people in our families and we hurt them instead. We got back at people in school or at our work by not being as nice to them as we could have been.

Where we fall short of God's glory the most is in our relationship to God. We were not always as loyal and faithful as we should have been. We missed golden opportunities to pray or to grow in the Word as the Lord wants for our lives. We opened ourselves up to sin. Every sin we commit whether it be things we do or fail to do, cries out and underscores that we are not faithful.

In Isaiah 40 it says "All flesh is grass, and all the glory of man is like the flower of the field." Flowers wither and dry up and decay. The word for "glory" is that same word "chesed" translated as "kindness" or "mercy" or "steadfast love." My loyalty and yours is not what God expected of us. That is why we end another year on this earth confessing, "I confess that I am by nature sinful and that I have disobeyed you in my thoughts, words and actions. I have done what is evil and failed to do what is good."

In contrast to all the unfaithfulness we see around us, and also inside of us, we look up to the Lord and hear Isaiah say, "I will tell of the kindnesses of the Lord, the deeds for which he is to be praised, according to all that he has done for us, the many good things he has done for the house of Israel." Measure the kindness of the Lord by reading again the words from our second lesson in Galatians 4, "But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son." God kept his Word, he always keeps his Word. God is faithful. Jesus was faithful. When it came time to come into this world Psalm 40 tells us that Jesus spoke these words, "I have come to do you will O God." We see this loyalty in the Garden when he prayed, "Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me, not my will, but yours be done!" We see

this loyalty as Jesus is dying with the sin of the world on himself, paying for all the times people have been unfaithful to God and to each other. Having finished making a complete and thorough payment for all sin he cried out from the cross, "It is finished!"

Measure salvation

We can also look back and measure the salvation the Lord has prepared for us. If we do this we will see a cup not half empty or half full, but always running over. "He said, 'Surely they are my people, sons who will not be false to me', and so he became their Savior." God came through and saved for himself a people who were not false to him, even though the majority of people turned their hearts against the Lord. There was so much bad stuff happening when Isaiah wrote these words. Here is how Isaiah described the situation. "I have reared children and brought them up but they have rebelled against me... They have forsaken the Lord; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel." The same Lord offered hope for these people in the salvation he provided for them just as he offers hope for us. "Come now, let us reason together," says the Lord. Though your sins are like scarlet they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool."

How can you ever begin to find a cup large enough to measure the salvation the Lord has provided for you? Years come and go, yet the forgiveness we have in the blood of Jesus remains constantly the same. We live each day knowing we have been baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We come to Holy Communion and actually receive physically with our lips and mouth the very body and blood the Lord. We see the faith the Lord has given us to believe in Jesus and we say with Paul in Ephesians 1, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ." Jesus is the vine and we are the branches attached to him. That allows us to bear fruit for and allows us to be sons and daughters who are not false to him, but always faithful, only through Christ.

Some day in heaven we will all gather around the throne of the Lamb and sing a beautiful song that John heard in the Revelation. "And they cried out in a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne and to the Lamb.'" Everything we are in Christ is totally in the hands of the Lord. We can sing about that in heaven and we can sing about this every day of our lives here on this earth. That was true this past year, and that will be true this coming year. That is why our cup of blessings is always running over.

Measure compassion

We still have more to measure here this morning as we listen to Isaiah tell us how good the Lord has been to us. "In all their distress, he too was distressed, and the angel of his presence saved them. In his love and mercy he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old." After God's people came out of Egypt and passed through the waters of the Red Sea, the Lord spoke these words to them on Mount Sinai, "You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagle's wings and brought you to myself." The Lord heard the cries of God's people in Egypt. He had compassion on their pain and suffering. It says of Jesus in Hebrews 4, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who is tempted in every way, just as we are, yet was without sin." No body knows the trouble I've

seen. No body knows but Jesus.”

How many times as the Lord lifted you and carried you on eagles wings this past year? How many times will he carry you in the years to come? Isaiah chapter 40 ends with these words, “But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not be weary, they will walk and not be faint.” How true are these words when we look at this past year: “In his love and mercy he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.”

Once again we face a new year with the cup of God’s kindness overflowing. Your cup is full of the loyalty, salvation and compassion of the Lord. These are the blessings you have now and they will not change in 2008! Amen.