

Sermon Title: Aaron's Beard

Scripture: Psalm 133:1-3; Leviticus 8:12

“How very good (*towb* - beautiful, agreeable, cheerful) and pleasant (*na'iyim* – delightful) when kindred (brothers again to) live together in unity! Like precious oil on the head, running (descending) down upon the beard (*zaqan* – indicating an old man), the beard of Aaron, over the collar (*peh* – edge, mouth) of his robes.”

There are seven (7) Sundays in the Easter Season leading up to Pentecost Sunday on May 19th. The 2nd Sunday of the Easter season is primarily known as “Divine Mercy Sunday,” highlighting a verse from 1st Peter: By your plenteous and infinite, abundant and divine, mercy, you have given us a new birth into a living hope based on the resurrection of Jesus Christ.” (1 Peter 1:3) This divine mercy of God bears us into a new world of living hope, described in the Letter to the Hebrews as an “anchor for the soul,” weighing us down into place, no longer an uncertain hoping, but an already received reality of what has been hoped.

In addition to being Divine Mercy Sunday, the 2nd Sunday of Easter is also known as “Holy Humor Sunday,” a day for the relaxing of the rules after Easter Sunday, similar to Fruit Cake Sunday after Christmas, only a little more official than that one. It is a Sunday built into the Easter season where we are allowed to be somewhat less than serious about ourselves, even to the point of laughing at ourselves, throwing caution to the wind.

Not so very long ago, Shepherd of the Hills Christian Church, in Austin, Texas, celebrated annually an event we called “Fall Festival.” Families would come to the church in fall-ish costumes, garnish our hair and our faces with different fall colors, embellish fall cookies and eat them, play various games for prizes, like stop-the-music, bingo-by-a-different-name, gone-fishing, and, my favorite, a fall fundraiser called mess-with-the-pastor, where for a small donation, a dime or a quarter, you might get to mess-up-the-pastor's-hair, pour water over the pastor's head, or put a pie in the pastor's face, among other creative things. When I read Psalm 133, I see a similar context for humor, as if brothers were re-uniting with brothers, after being absent for some time, and celebrating being able to be with each other again. The gladness of this event is symbolized with oil running down Aaron's beard and overflowing across his robe and down under the different edges of his garment, “beyond the skirts” of his robe, to his body. In other words, joy represented by disrupting the somber and stiff formality of anointment with amazement and fun. Equivalence might be seen in taking off a suit-coat and loosening a tie, or even cutting off that tie and hanging it on a board. The message: “joy is the language spoken around here!” or “Peace and equality reside in this space, dress appropriately.”

The Psalm for today is based on the story of Aaron's anointing in Leviticus 8. Taken together they paint a picture that we might not normally see when reading Scripture. Aaron had a beard. He was not clean-shaven. It was not common for men to even trim their beards, although, on occasion, they are asked to do so as part of ritual cleansing, not just shaving the edges (trimming) but also shaving the entire beard, and, on other occasions, offering the shavings as a part of a peace offering at the altar. However, it was all together normal to have a beard in ancient times. We should not assume that having a beard implies that someone is nefarious or not trustworthy, regardless of whether it is nicely trimmed or not. Ritual cleansing in Judaism is not required of everyone. It is situational not absolute, not prescriptive nor proscriptive. So, we should not look upon Aaron or his beard in any negative kind of way. That is to say, it is perfectly appropriate to look upon Aaron's beard and the overflowing oil as humorous and inviting, even welcoming. It makes Aaron one of us, human, relatable. It breaks down the barriers between people, it brings peace. Aaron can no longer hide the smile or the humanity behind his beard.

It calls to mind a poem by Edward Lear, entitled A Book of Nonsense:

"There was an Old Man with a beard, Who said, "It is just as I feared!-- Two Owls and a Hen, Four Larks and a Wren, Have all built their nests in my beard!"

In my sermon today, I shall be sharing some jokes with you, some holy humor. And I may pause to allow you time to catch up and laugh at the joke in your virtual beard. So, my first joke:

While touring Israel, two people thought they'd rent a boat and take it across the Sea of Galilee. "That'll be a hundred dollars," said the man at the boat rental.

"A hundred dollars? That's an outrageous amount!" one of the tourists exclaimed.

"Ah, but this is the lake Jesus walked on," the merchant pointed out.

To which the irritated tourist replied, "For a hundred dollars a boat, I can see why!"

So, moving on, let's take a closer look at this man, this husband, this father, named Aaron, the one with the beard.

Aaron was the younger brother of Miriam, and the older brother of Moses. He was the middle child of Amram (the Levite) and Jochebod. As the one in the middle of a three-some, we know he would have trouble fitting-in with the others. He might have felt neglected or possibly ignored. He would probably have worked hard to receive attention. He might have desperately wanted approval, and willing to go to great lengths to achieve it. In today's terms, if Miriam is known as the wild thing with the reckless tambourine, Aaron would be the disobedient biker with the golden calf tattoo.

Moses deemed his brother the more eloquent speaker, the child most likely to succeed. Because of his birth order, Aaron, no doubt, saw himself as born to be the peacemaker in his family. It is rumored that when Moses poured the holy oil over his head, Aaron modestly shrank back and said: "Who knows whether I have not cast some blemish upon this sacred oil so as to forfeit this high office." Yet, Aaron wanted more sibling respect for his very appropriate humility. He wanted his brother and sister to be more tolerant of each other. This despite the legend recorded in the Book of Numbers, that Moses "was very humble, very meek, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth." (Num. 12:3). Actually, rabbinic tradition held up Aaron, not Moses, as the primary example of peacemaking: "Be ye disciples of Aaron, loving and pursuing peace, reconciling families when estranged, neighbors when they quarreled, bringing wanderers back into the fold." (*Tanhuma*). In Psalm 133, Aaron is the image and symbol of renewal for his family and for the nation. The anointing oil flowing down his beard represents the unity of brothers being together again, renewing their birth bonds, in celebration of shalom. In God's eyes, Aaron, the family peacemaker is the one chosen to become the community peacemaker, the priest to all the families of Israel. So, God tells Moses to anoint him as the first priest of the nation, a father and counselor to the many families of the twelve tribes, a father to the fathers of those tribes, a father to whoever might come after him in the priesthood.

Like the true older brother, had not Aaron come to the rescue (Ex. 4:14) of his stuttering brother, Moses? Had he not spoken bravely before Pharaoh? Had he not provided his own hand-crafted staff to his brother Moses in order to persuade the hard-hearted king of Egypt of its magical power? Had he not convinced the entire court of Pharaoh that each of the plagues would come upon them just as Moses predicted? Had he not been more convincing than the magicians of Egypt that God could outperform their magic? Had he not held up the rod (Ex. 17:12) that guaranteed success in a battle with the Amalekites when Moses was too weak to do so?

Joke #2

A pastor was speaking to a group of second-graders about the resurrection of Jesus when one student asked, "What did Jesus say right after He came out of the grave?"

The pastor explained that the Gospels do not tell us what He said.

The hand of one little girl shot up. "I know what He said: He said, 'Tah-dah!'"

Joke #3:

"Teacher," Tommy asked in Sunday School, "I don't understand. You're always saying that 'the children of Israel did this' and 'the children of Israel did that.' Didn't the grownups ever do *anything?*"

Moving on.

And, so, there were other times when the older brother, Aaron, did not live up to expectations.

Had not Aaron disputed God's Word in the wilderness of Sinai, that God would bring water from the rock at Meribeh? Or possibly he just wanted to put his younger brother Moses in his proper place? Aaron's faith had begun to lack magic in recent times, and perhaps, precisely because he had been there when the Egyptian magicians in Pharaoh's court failed, he knew how easy it might be to fall from grace. I can see him warning his brother not to get too carried away when speaking for God. Because of his humility, God had given Aaron the sacred symbol of decision-making (the Urim and Thummim) as a breastplate over his heart. When Jethro (Moses' father-in-law) advised Moses to share the workload of ministry, of counseling, he was reflecting the wisdom and humility of Aaron. Truly, we should share the burdens of ministry together! In the spirit of sharing the load, Moses should have paused a moment and remembered how God had carried them on eagle's wings throughout the wilderness journey (Ex. 19:4).

Despite his many failures, Aaron did have a good heart! Yes, he was somewhat challenged when it came to holy imagination. But aren't we all a bit that way? One of the truths of our current day is that ceaseless trauma eventually wears down our imagination, slowly taking away our ability to imagine a different way. The ability to recognize when God provides a new way when we believe that there is no way.

Joke #4

"A lady went into the grocery and asked for fifty gallons of milk. The clerk, amazed, asked her what she was going to do with that much milk. 'I have a skin problem and the doctor prescribed a milk bath.' The clerk asked: 'Pasteurized?' She replied: 'No just up to my chin.'

#5: A man to his wife: I don't mean to brag, but I just put a puzzle together in 1 day and the box said: 2-4 years.

Moving on.

Though family squabbles led Aaron to join his sister, Miriam, in taunting his brother about his Ethiopian (Midianite) wife, Zipporah (Num. 12:1), and maybe throwing in a little ethnic prejudice too, Moses held his own in all the family squabbles, especially protecting his sons, Gershom and Eliezer, from any bad outcomes. Moses had, after all, grown up in Pharaoh's family, an Egyptian family, and knew how traumatic ethnic prejudice could be; he was caught up in this trauma himself, fleeing Egypt because of it. I believe Aaron was, himself, both a good husband to Elisheba, and a good father to his four (4) sons, Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar.

All Aaron's sons were in the line of succession, but the eldest two were not able to succeed their father. They died childless before their father after offering a "strange fire" at the altar (Num

3:4). But Eleazar and Ithamar did succeed their father as priests. The mother of John the Baptist traced her line to one of these sons, a descendent of Aaron. Eli, Samuel's mentor, traced his lineage to Ithamar. From all respects, and for all we know, Aaron was a good father, bringing up his two youngest sons with a strong faith in God; bringing up his two oldest sons with love despite their inability to follow in his footsteps.

Joke #5

A bird-watcher in the wee small hours of the morning, listening in on birds of pray: "Give us this day our daily worm."

Three wise women at Epiphany: "Would have asked directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, brought practical gifts, cleaned the stable, made a casserole, and there would be peace on earth."

St. Peter at the pearly gates to a man standing in his pajamas: "Sorry. Your username and password do not match."

A man and his wife shaking hands with the preacher at the door: "You're in a rut, Pastor, Everytime I come here you preach about the resurrection."

"You know, Pastor, I'm spiritual but I don't believe in organized religion." Church Administrator: "Oh, don't let that bother you, He's not organized at all."

Moving on.

Moses fulfilled the will of God. Aaron was anointed with the "oil of gladness;" he wore "a garment of praise rather than a faint spirit," and he will forever be called "oak of righteousness, the planting of the Lord," (Is. 61:3). The oil of joy overflows his beard and his robe, and inside his tunic, and in every direction. As fathers, let us today live into that same spirit of joy, the same praising spirit, the same strength of spirit, so that we too may be known as "oaks of righteousness," oaks also of justice, and oaks of peace, and oaks of joy. Alleluia! Amen.