

Mercy, me (2 Peter 3:8-15a)

Mercy is not what we're about, and I suspect we don't want our God to be about it, either.

by [Kathleen Norris](#) in the [November 29, 2005](#) issue

"Mercy" is the one expletive my grandmother Norris allowed herself, the all-purpose exclamation for times when she was too awestruck, befuddled or exasperated to say anything else. People do have a need for expletives—it may be as deep as our need for language itself—and during the 1960s, when my Bennington classmates swore like sailors, I joined in to fit in. In those days I considered my grandmother's "Mercy" to be amusing, and even charming, but also embarrassingly anachronistic. Now that I am older, more care-free and far less sophisticated, "Mercy" seems a fine word for those moments when other words fail. As a Christian, I can always claim that mercy is what it's all about.

But it's hard to lay claim to mercy in a culture that encourages us to be less than merciful. It's only smart to think the worst of others and their motives and then act accordingly. How else are we to protect ourselves? The labels that so readily come to mind and too easily fall from our tongues—right-wing nut-job, knee-jerk liberal, homophobe, pervert—only amplify the atmosphere of fear and hostility. The enormous popularity of the Left Behind books leads me to suspect that many people conceive of the "day of the Lord" as Hollywood-style vengeance, God's coming again to show those backsliders and unbelievers who's right, once and for all. Mercy is not what we're about, and we don't want our God to be about it, either.

What are we to do, then, with Isaiah's "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God"? Can it be that God is so completely and utterly merciful that God would lead and even carry us, like a shepherd? Isaiah's comfort can seem a bit cold, reminding us that all flesh is grass. But isn't that exactly the kind of clarity we need to bring us to our senses, and to put in better perspective our busy and distracted lives?

When I first read the Rule of St. Benedict many years ago, his injunction "to keep death daily before your eyes" seemed morbid, epitomizing a negative stereotype of

the stern, ascetic monk. But having spent the better part of five years helping to provide first my father, and then my husband, with a good death, I find that Benedict's words now console and guide me. They call me to be more merciful in my dealings with other mortals, and with myself.

The passage from 2 Peter is a call to patience, and also a vivid depiction of God's patience as being deeply rooted in mercy. We are invited to emulate both virtues, for only if we can remain mindful of our own need for salvation will we be able to resist our impatience, the temptation to ask God to "bring it on" and obliterate the bad guys. For me, this passage sums up the Christian argument against the death penalty. When we impose it, we are allowing our impatience for retribution to override God's unfathomable patience and compassion for all people, even those we consider beyond redemption.

In our violent and unsettled times, some religious extremists, both Christian and Muslim, appear to be impatient for a death sentence to be imposed upon the entire human race. Better to cleanse this world by destroying it than to let us go about our complacently wicked ways. If this seems to have a twisted logic, our scripture readings make it clear that this is human weakness, after all. For God's strength is, and ever has been, patience and forbearance.

We know things are bad when we must turn to John the Baptist for comfort. What can this crusty, hard-edged character, dressed in animal skins and subsisting on locusts and wild honey, have to say to us? What possible relevance can he have?

John has always been a mysterious and troubling figure to me. I have never been sure where to place him, or how to listen to him. But today's gospel makes John's significance clear. He is one of the messengers that God always provides to wake us up and help prepare the way. His words may bring to mind people in our own lives who have been such faithful harbingers of truth, those who have smoothed the way for us, leveling the rough places through which we must walk, even as they challenge us to seek to be the people God calls us to be.

When we look to John we find mercy made plain, for he points to God's ultimate purpose, which is the forgiveness of our sins. No doubt aware that his words would seem strange, and even dangerous, likely to bring him to an unjust death, John insisted on God's compassion and mercy. In the wilderness of hatred and violence that we have made of the world, John makes us ask, Can it be that mercy really is at the heart of God? It seems too good, and too bad, to be true. What room is there for

our revenge, the satisfaction of seeing those we detest judged and put in their place? None whatsoever. But there is room for us, if we will only believe, as the epistle puts it, that God's patience is salvation for us all. It's when we are made to recognize our own neediness that we can stand, lost in wonder, praise and not a little exasperation, and give thanks as my grandmother Norris would do, saying only, "Oh, Mercy."