

SNC, 08, Feb 17, Growing in Faith
Exodus 4: 27- 5:23

The Turkish city of Izmet is situated on a geological fault line. At 4 am, Aug 17, 1999, the dreaded event happened. There was an earthquake. It buried and killed more than twelve thousand people.

One of the TV images from the first 24 hours that remains with me is of men frantically digging, using their hands, refusing to slow down or give in, prepared to keep going for as long as it took, to find people under the rubble.

It's unthinkable really, to be trapped in that way, buried alive, waiting, hoping to be found.

It's an image that could also describe another kind of darkness that buries many people in this world, the darkness of addictions and mental illness, depression, hopelessness, meaninglessness, despair, the spiritual darkness that buries many people.

Sometimes we are there too. None of us are immune.

When we're in the grips of these dark forces, we don't need people to judge, - we don't need the old snap out of it, pull yourself together, because we can't- when we're lost and helpless, buried in the dark, we need people to dig, and not to give up on us.

Some of us know someone who is buried in the rubble of addiction, or depression, seemingly so distant that we cannot reach them. As Christians our task is not to judge, but to dig, and to know that God digs at our side, and God never gives up on any one. Ever.

And prayer is the most powerful way that we may remove the layers of spiritual rubble that envelopes a person. Our task is to pray and never give up.

Those men in Turkey, so tireless in their determination to dig for their loved ones, is for me a reminder of God, who never gives up on us when we are buried in despair, in spiritual darkness.

God is digging, uncovering the layers of unbelief that stifle us- and God finds people like Moses, to go and work at God's side to rescue people trapped in darkness and to bring them to the light of faith.

When someone is buried under earthquake rubble, imagine the hope they must feel, when they first hear the sound of digging! imagine the joy and relief when they first feel the touch of a human hand.

That's surely like the moment when we first believe.

Like the moment Moses told the Israelites that God had heard their cry, and he did the signs God had shown him, and they believed- just like that, like starving people, suddenly being showered with bread. There were none of the arguments that Moses had feared- they were so hungry to believe.

Do you remember the moment you first believed? I remember it- it was when I prayed my first prayer as an adult.

That prayer was like a rope thrown out into the inky blackness of space with no real expectation, and suddenly there was a tug at the end of the rope-, a response to the prayer- it was unmistakable, and I knew for the first time, that there was someone out there, someone listening, caring, responding.

I have often heard people report that their first desperate prayers ARE answered. It seems that God WANTS us to know that God cares. God gives us signs and wonders so that we may believe.

But then that changes, as God wants to strengthen our faith. As we continue on our faith journey, it seems that we are required to believe even though we cannot see any signs.

The people of Israel, after the first wonder that led them to believe, actually found that their situation had worsened. God had said he would rescue them, they had said "OH yes, Lord, you're wonderful and mighty", but now- they had to gather straw for themselves and still produce the same amount of bricks. It was inhuman. It didn't make sense. They immediately lost faith. They no longer believed. And neither did Moses.

It's the same with many of us. When things go well, we say, "yes, there is a God;" when things don't work out as we would like, or when tragedy strikes, we say, "where's God?" "What kind of a God allows this to happen?"

The problem is not that God does not care. The problem is that the whole world lives on a fault line.

Not a geological one, but a spiritual one, and every bit as dangerous. There are forces constantly threatening to destroy God's creation: no one has satisfactorily explained where these forces come from, but we know certain things about them.

Firstly, we know that they are real. Secondly, we know that they are not in any way as powerful as God. And thirdly, we know that something changed in the balance of power in the spiritual world through Jesus Christ.

So that when we invite Christ into a situation, when we turn towards Christ's light, as we do in prayer, those forces dissipate- they cannot stand before Christ's power. So we don't have to be afraid.

But we do need to recognize the REALITY of spiritual forces and our vulnerability. And those who are especially vulnerable, like the people of Israel in today's reading, are NEW believers, people making new beginnings in their faith.

We're especially vulnerable when we make a resolution (as some of us did at the beginning of Lent) to read the bible and pray every day, or to turn away from something wrong that we've been doing. We all know the multitude of pressures that get in our way.

Especially vulnerable too, are people, like Moses, in positions of spiritual leadership. It's really important to pray for our spiritual leaders: There are forces that will try to overwhelm us, and to stop us from walking on the path of faith. But none of us should get discouraged.

John Bunyan's book, "Pilgrim's Progress", is an allegory of our faith journey, and in it he describes a scene where Pilgrim is shown a fire coming from a wall and a man is desperately trying to put out the fire, and he can't.

Then Pilgrim is shown the other side of the wall, and there he sees another man who is determinedly stoking the fire.

The message is that there are forces constantly trying to put out the flames of faith in us, constantly trying to drown our hope and enthusiasm for God; and these are the forces we see and experience.

But, unseen, on the other side of the wall, God is working very determinedly to fan the flames of faith. We need to remember that God's grace is working, even when we are least able to see it.

And this means persevering in our faith journey.

So, our prayers are not answered. It seems like no one is out there. Keep praying. Keep praying. So, we've fallen into the same moral pitfall that we swore we'd never do ever again. We need to accept; to accept our humanity. And accept that we're forgiven.

God accepts us, God forgives us. God declares us worthy. Know that God is working there, unseen, and does not give up on us; there's no need for us to give up either.

I want to read to you these entries from the diary of a very famous Christian preacher. He writes:

Sunday, A.M., May 5

Preached in St. Anne's. Was asked not to come back anymore.

Sunday, P.M., May 5

Preached in St. John's. Deacons said "Get out and stay out."

Sunday, A.M., May 12

Preached in St. Jude's. Can't go back there, either.

Sunday, A.M., May 19

Preached in St. Somebody Else's. Deacons called special meeting and said I couldn't return.

Sunday, P.M., May 19

Preached on street. Kicked off street.

Sunday, A.M., May 26

Preached in meadow. Chased out of meadow as bull was turned loose during service.

Sunday, A.M., June 2

Preached out at the edge of town. Kicked off the highway.

Sunday, P.M., June 2

Afternoon, preached in a pasture. Ten thousand people came out to hear me.

This is from the diary of John Wesley. What if Wesley had given up after any of those earlier rejections?

Another famous Christian, and explorer, David Livingstone, received a letter from the missionary society, saying, "Have you found a good road to where you are? If so, we want to know how to send other men to join you.

Livingstone wrote back, "If you have men who will come only if they know there is a good road, I don't want them. I want men who will come if there is no road at all"

There are absolutely no guarantees in the Christian life. When we embark on this journey of faith, when we commit ourselves to following Jesus, we're not going to find that our lives suddenly get easy. We may find the opposite.

What we will find is that we grow more and more resilient, and that through sweet moments of grace we will come to recognize the sound of our savior- digging for us beneath the rubble, and we will come to have confidence in our own digging for others, because we know who is at our side.

And each time on our journey that we experience the grace of God we will know more and more deeply that there are no forces in this universe that can overwhelm or destroy us, not in this life or the next.

To God be all the praise, the honor and the glory, Amen.