

Runnymede United Church

The 3rd Sunday in Lent, March 2, 2010

Isaiah 55: 1-9; Psalm 63; Luke 13: 1-9

'A Big-enough God'

A friend with family connections in North Carolina has stories about life and faith in that part of the US. One concerns a will once filed in the state: an eccentric woman left her estate "to God". How was it to be paid? To settle the matter, a suit was filed, naming God as defendant. The local sheriff was appointed to serve a summons, and finally brought in the answer: "After due and diligent search, God cannot be found in Cherokee County."

Where would someone serve that summons? Where would you go? Did the sheriff knock on the door of a woman who feels Christ's presence at communion, in prayer? Did he talk to the minister I know who conducted a funeral for a homeless man, attended only by a few other homeless people, who expected to feel depressed, but experienced the room suffused by golden light, and felt God's presence as never before? What if the sheriff had come here, to Runnymede?

You are my God, the psalmist writes. I long for you... my soul thirsts for you.

What does it mean to find God?

Marcus Borg, a best-selling theological writer - an oxymoron?! - wrote *The God We Never Knew*. In it, he traces his faith journey, from a child whose images of God ranged from resident police officer and heavenly bosom, to an adolescent whose God, out there, created the world long ago, occasionally intervened, but was somewhere else, beyond the world. As a young man, he found he could not believe in that God. Borg points to the necessity to find that God is big enough for our spiritual needs. Though technology and science have expanded mental horizons, Borg says, our conception of God has too often remained limited. By 'big enough', he means God who is 'right here' as well as 'beyond and cosmic', God who calls us to live in relationship with the sacred and with creation.

Borg says that our concept of God matters: it can make God seem distant or near, absent or present. Too often, we put God into a box - out there - and fail to live as if we were in relationship with God - right here.

*God is the beyond in our midst,*¹ wrote Dietrich Bonhoeffer from a Nazi cell days before his death by hanging. He died with that faith in his heart, on his lips: God in Bonhoeffer's theological language is both transcendent and immanent: the one beyond and out there, who is right here.

Isaiah, Luke, the Psalmist remind us that God's mystery transcends our boxes: God, speaking through Isaiah, says: *...my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways, my ways.* The psalmist sings: *your steadfast love is better than life itself.* In Luke, Jesus challenges age-old ideas of tragedy as punishment for sin, suffering as God's vengeance and will!

The eighteen people killed when the tower fell on them at Siloam - do you imagine that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? The ancient answer - *yes!* - is too easy, too limiting. God, Jesus states firmly, did not will their death. Suffering is not God's punishment, but an inevitable part of life. God does not will death through accident, nor AIDS, nor cancer, nor earthquake. God is bigger than that, and closer. When suffering and tragedy occur, God is with us, there where the stones fall, in that hospice bed.

'O world of God', we will sing: 'so vast and strange... beyond the utmost reach of thought, but not beyond our Maker's care.' RBY Scott's wonderful words proclaim 'the wisdom of the ways of God, the grace through which our hurt is healed': a 'big-enough God'.

Some special experiences seem to those who have them to offer a taste of the sacred: expanding, even shattering, human notions of what is real and what is possible. Whether we call them visions or mystical experiences, these are times when we see the world we normally see, but it feels radically different. A room full of pain is transformed, suffused with light; the boundary between self and world becomes softer, and we feel strangely more connected than separate. We say or hear, 'I'm sorry', a feeling of healing fills us, and shackles of depression or fear drop away. Abraham Maslow named these moments, when a radical shift in perception can happen, 'peak experiences': times when a momentary melting away of the ego's hard boundaries can transform us. Maslow argues that such is 'the core religious experience', whether it happens in a secular or religious setting. God moves beyond and through those walls.² Part of finding God is recognizing that God reaches out to us in unexpected places and ways.

Jesus points us toward another way of finding God. I think he would have enjoyed the story I heard recently about a Church School teacher who wanted to talk about God's nurturing ways. Placing a flowering plant on a table, she pointed to it, and asked, "Who made the flowers grow?" One little boy answered, "God did!" The teacher smiled. Then the girl beside him said, "Yes, but some fertilizer sure helped."

Jesus seems to have known about growing things. In today's gospel, Jesus speaks in a parable of the fig tree which, year after year, bore no fruit, until the vineyard owner became frustrated with its wasting the soil. But the gardener interceded on behalf of the unproductive tree, asking for one more year - to dig its roots, give it manure.

Time for confession: I probably read as many (more?) books about gardening as about theology, in a year. It was in one of the former that I learned about fig trees: that their species needs shaking up, digging at the roots. When its roots are disturbed, a fig tree can grow more fully into the fruitful tree God intends.

How are you, I, this congregation, like the fig tree in Jesus' parable? What roots need disturbing, are being disturbed, in your life? What fruit may grow in response to long-established roots being dislocated? What if we believed not only that God's grace is at work here, among us, but that it is God who agitates my roots, jiggles you into another way of being?

On this third Sunday in Lent our focus is on God, beyond and within us. But it is also on me and you. Jesus' clear call to us is to repent, which simply means to change direction, turn around, thereby getting in touch with, finding, God. *Repent*: Can you think of a time when you thought you were heading in the right direction, but discovered you were going the wrong way? What did you do? Continue? Or turn around? In Isaiah's words: *return to God, who will have mercy... to our God who will abundantly pardon - freely forgive.* (55:7)

God is waiting to be found. A Jewish story tells of a little boy playing hide-and-seek with friends. For some reason they stopped playing while he was hiding. He waited, waited, began to cry. His grandmother came. After hearing his story, she said, "Do not weep, my child, because the other children have gone. Perhaps you can learn from this disappointment. All of life is like a game between God and us. Only it is God who is weeping, for

we are not playing fairly. God is waiting to be found, but many of us have gone in search of other things."³

This Lent think about fasting and feasting. Try to fast from images of God as beyond and far away. God is to be found here, in this city, at Runnymede. Feast on the sense that God can be found - here and now. Our God is big enough and close enough: for you to turn around and find, for me to be shaken by, for us to grow with. Let us consider how we can best bear God's fruit. Our God is big enough. Amen.

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