Sermon C Lent 5 2025\_ SCED

The most common title for God in the Old Testament is that of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. This title for God reflects God’s relationship with the human beings God had called into a covenant relationship. Of course it’s a very male-oriented naming, with Sarah and Rebecca and Rachel and Leah considered not deserving of a mention. But it is not the patriarchal nature of biblical writings that I would like us to explore today ...

There is another popular way of describing God in the Old Testament, and that is by naming the mighty acts of God throughout history. And our Old Testament reading today from Isaiah begins with just such a description: God is identified as the one who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters. This of course refers to the Exodus from Egypt the archetypal narrative of God’s deliverance of the people of Israel.

Interestingly, the Psalm today reflects the same kind of identification of God with marvellous acts. The Psalmist tells us, “The Lord has done great things for us and therefore we rejoiced.”

In Isaiah God’s mighty acts in leading the children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt in the event of the Exodus is a memory which gives the prophet Isaiah heart to say that God is now about to do a *new* thing. For the Psalmist it’s similar. God’s mighty acts in the past give hope to a people who are oppressed and afflicted in the present (probably through the exile in Babylon). And the hope is that God will once more act on their behalf. The plea of the Psalmist is: “Turn again our fortunes O Lord As the streams return to the dry south.”

There is something very compelling about this relationship of the ancient Israelites with their unnameable yet intimate God. And yet this strikes up a theological problem for those who today consider the biblical stories of God’s deliverance:

* We might wonder, is this God is still viewed by the Jewish community today as a God of strong intervention?
* How can we explain the fact that historically God acted, but that in the contemporary world God often seems not to act?
* Is God is an interventionist God or not?
* Does God intervene in response to human suffering and pain?
* Does God still find the despairing cry of God’s faithful people irresistible?
* Can God be expected to act on their behalf to bring them justice and peace in their time?

A few years ago I read Henri Nouwen’s “Genesee Diary” as my personal Lenten study. I remember reading in that text that Rabbi Heschel, one of the great Jewish spiritual leaders of the 20th century, believed that the Exodus out of Pharaoh’s Egypt was the revelation of God’s presence, and the holocaust in Nazi Germany was the revelation of God’s absence. **[Repeat]** Here is no simplistic resolution to the problem. This Jewish teaching understands that God is both present, and seemingly interventionist at times, and yet is absent and seemingly inactive at other times. To contemporary Jewish thinkers to opt for one pole or the other, for God’s presence or God’s absence; would be a reductionist way of understanding God’s mystery. This has led to a kind of fatalism that marks a Jewish approach to the problem of suffering: as in “The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.”

It is important for contemporary Christians like us to ask some questions of ourselves. What do we believe? Do we believe in an interventionist God who finds our prayer irresistible? Or do we believe in the deistic idea that God set creation in motion and promptly left it to its own devices? And to further pin the question down, do we believe that God cares for us? Do we look to God to supply our needs? Do we believe that God hears our prayer, and will intervene to change things in response to our prayers?

There’s a well-worked, mature and quite balanced theology of prayer that says:

* that we pray because Jesus taught his disciples to, and writings of the Bible encourage us to.
* We believe in Jesus’ promise that God hears our prayer, and even knows what we will ask for before we begin.
* We believe that God is a good God who wishes only goodness for us.
* We believe that prayer is a special kind of “looking to God” and that it opens up possibilities for God’s Spirit to enter human life with a balm of love, healing, and reconciliation. Perhaps God is more inclined to act if we invite God into our lives and circumstances.
* And we believe all that, even if the things we ask for are not in themselves granted to us, because we believe prayer always brings about some good in our lives or the lives of others.

Like our Jewish friends, we Christians know about the tension between God’s presence and God’s absence, and we too discern God’s mystery in it. And we Christians also believe that because we can’t resolve the poles it does not mean that we should stop cleaving to God/ looking to God to strengthen and uphold us as we try to live according to God’s will.

Of course there is the possibility that we have got out of the habit of cleaving to, or looking to. God. We live lives of great privilege, considerable comfort and often significant excess. This can give us an illusion of self-reliance that appears to have no need of God or which leaves no room for God.

So, if during this Lent we find we can’t exactly resolve the conundrum of God’s presence and God’s absence, God’s intervention and God’s restraint, we can at least begin to broach the question, “In the life I am living do I look to God?” and if the answer is that I don’t or not enough, the probability is that I am seeking strength in other things which are really not of comparable value.

It goes against the grain to refer to Mary who anointed Jesus as a kind of a footnote of a sermon, so I hope you’ll forgive me for doing this. (It’s tantamount to overlooking Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah in the naming of God in the Old Testament). But Mary’s anointing of Jesus can offer an example to us today. Mary looked to Jesus. She brought a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard. Mary was gloriously wasteful, and sure, she could have been accused of forgetting her moral responsibility to the poor. But Mary looked to Jesus, and in that room on that evening she looked to no one else. With a great yet lowly singleness of purpose she anointed Jesus’ feet and wiped them with her hair, an act of exemplary homage. How are we looking to Jesus during this Lent? We have no opportunity to anoint him with perfume or holy oil. Yet we can anoint him in preparation for his passion and death with our prayers which in a way always place us in that ambiguous space between presence and absence; knowing that the mysterious nature of our God is found there too: poised between presence and absence, activity and inactivity. Indeed, if we place ourselves between presence and absence in the faithful act of prayer we will find that we are plunged right into the heart of the enduring mystery of our loving and faithful God who may not give us everything we want, but whom we know ultimately will never let us down. **Amen.**