

“A Higher Vision, A Higher Power” ©

03/03/2013 - Lent 3C -- Rev. Seth D. Jones

Scripture verses: Isaiah 55:1-9; Luke 13:1-9

The Prophet Isaiah tells us today, “*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts*” (Is 55:8-9). When things are good, this is a very satisfying answer. But when things are not so good, it is hard to believe this is good news - that God knows more than you and, finally, you cannot know what God is really up to in your life and in the world.

We don't do well with mystery in our culture. For us, it is an excuse when we feel we need to defend the actions of God. Or, mystery is something to be solved, a riddle to be answered. We need to fill the empty space mystery creates with answers, technological advances and ego. It cannot stand.

When we, by way of our faith in Christ, begin to no longer “*regard no one from a human point of view*” (2 Cor 5:16), we begin to see the world with the eyes of mystery. We can really only do this when we acknowledge several fundamental things. We must acknowledge a God who has created and that we are God's creation. We must acknowledge that a Higher Power is at work, whether we are cognizant of what is going on or not. We must acknowledge that this Higher Power has our personal interest in mind. What bothers me about the phrase “*It's a mystery*” when spoken about troubling aspects of life on Earth is the lack of any foundation in the statement. Or, to say it differently, the statement communicates a worldview I am somehow supposed to know but have no way of knowing. I am supposed to accept “*It's a mystery*” as an acceptable answer to my questions. And it really is unacceptable, just like it was unacceptable to Job when confronted with his friends' excellent, but poorly used, theology.

Mystery is only really a mystery when we accept the source of the mystery. We say that God is the source of all things and all things are subject to the reality of Jesus Christ. No longer seeing from a human point of view, or seeing from a “*higher view*”, means we are actually standing on a solid ground of faith and trust in something far greater than us who does have a clear view of what is going on. So we do not have faith in the mystery, but rather in God, who is the source of all things, and God's ways are not our ways, God's thoughts are not our thoughts.

It sure doesn't look like Good News, though, when people use God and the mystery of God's ways as an opportunity to hold others in judgment, to justify our need for power and control. This is what Jesus is dealing with when speaking to the people today. The Galilean tragedy was probably a massacre used by Pilate to create terror in the Jewish people. Pilate waited until the Jews were sacrificing to God during a service, and then came in and killed them in the synagogue, thereby mingling their own blood with the blood of the animals being sacrificed, which is the height of taboo. The mingling of blood condemns everyone involved.

Back in Jesus' day and age, when bad things happened, when tragedy struck, the occurrence was often used by the religious authorities as a crowbar to enforce moral behavior. See, if you do bad things, God will punish you. God kills sinners and will kill you for sinning.

Nothing much changes, does it? The hazard of seeking God, of being in relationship with an all-powerful God, is making the ego move of believing you know the mind of the God whom you seek. Just like the religious

authorities of the past, we have heard religious authorities of our day and age presume to know what God is up to in great disasters. After Hurricane Katrina leveled New Orleans, a well-known television evangelist condemned homosexuals, liberals and unbelievers and said the hurricane was God's judgment upon America for our sin. Jesus answers this televangelist by asking, "*Do you think those in New Orleans were worse sinners than anyone else, than you?*"

In 2007, in our hometown of Minneapolis, the I-35 bridge collapsed, killing 13 people and injuring over 100 people. It came down during rush hour at 6pm at night. The bridge was one of my regular routes to get to seminary, and to see the aftermath of the collapse was terrifying. There are all kinds of human reasons for such a thing to happen - the reports finally blamed structural flaws within the original construction of the bridge, and also lack of upkeep - and then there are the "why" questions which go to God in such a disaster. One pastor of a very large megachurch in Minneapolis sought to answer the question in the same way the religious authorities approached the Galilean massacre and the collapse of the tower at Siloam - by determining the sin of those who had died and presuming to know the mind of God in also condemning those who had died as sinners and those who live as in need of repentance. It was again a kind of spiritual power play, an abuse of spiritual authority. Jesus answers this pastor by saying, "*Do you think those who died on the I-35 bridge were worse offenders than all the others, than you?*"

Jesus' condemns the judgment inherent in the religious leaders' attempt to know the mind of God. Really, assuming to know the mind of God is just an excuse to lord it over others. In their incredible self-righteousness, the religious authorities who presumed to determine the sin of those who died in the massacre or those who died in the tower collapse were really just trying to promote themselves as the arbiters, the true judges of God's judgment.

When we seek a higher vision, one that accords with the leadership and lordship of Jesus Christ, when we acknowledge the higher power that is God's power, disasters, human or natural, have only one message for the living, Jesus tells us. The thing that happened is the thing that happened. We cannot make any determination about the people who died. But, Jesus tells us, if you want to get any meaning out of it, look to yourself, look to your own judgment and willingness to condemn, and repent, because if you don't repent of your self-righteousness and judgment, then you will face something like what those who died faced when you face God.

What is repentance, though? When Jesus calls us to repentance, what does he mean? The word repentance means, simply, to turn around and go the other direction, to stop in the way you are going and turn back to where you came from. From our readings today, we can say repentance means *relenting our personal ego and drive for whatever it is we want from others and even from ourselves, giving it over to God and giving in to God's higher power and vision.*

When we give into God's higher power and vision, we begin to see with something like the eyes of Christ. We begin to see with the eyes of compassion. People are no longer sinners condemned to death because of their sinful behavior; now they are struggling trees seeking to produce fruit. This is what the parable of the Barren Fig Tree is all about. Jesus places his hand on the hand that would execute its judgment upon the struggling tree and stops it, just as God places his hand on the hand of Abraham to stop Abraham from sacrificing his son, Isaac. With the fig tree, the gardener steps in on the tree's behalf and gains time, in order to help it grow and be fruitful in order for the promises of God to come to fulfillment. This is what Jesus does with us - he steps in and tends our

soil and our lives in such a way that we become fruitful. He steps between us and those who would cut us down, judge us, condemn us for who we are and what we have done and, instead, helps us grow into the people God intends us to be. This, right here, is the essence of repentance. This, right here, is the quality of God's vision and power. And this is what Jesus does with us, even in the face of turmoil, trouble and disaster.

There are a lot of things I struggle with in my faith life. One of the most difficult for me to deal with is the extinction of wildlife. I just saw the other day that giraffes are now in serious trouble and may become extinct in my lifetime. Worse, it is now predicted that unless things change, the entire Amazon rainforest will disappear by 2060. For me, this is a direct threat to my child's future and my personal faith. I am a firm believer in the goodness of God's creation. I also believe the harm we have done to God's creation stands as the primary act of unbelief in our world today. These things are very hard for me to resolve within my personal faith. It is very hard for me to see Good News when such things are present. I condemn others for the state of these things. I judge them harshly and believe them to stand in judgment with God, and in so judging - even if it has some earthly validity, I presume to know the mind of God.

When I am in that sort of mindset, I think of Job, who demands an audience with God for 38 chapters, who demands to know the mind of God, after having become the target of a game of faith between God and the Satan, the Adversary. God arrives in Chapter 38 and in 4 chapters essentially makes the same argument that Isaiah has given us today. To sum up God's argument at the end of Job, *"Look at all of Creation... Can you do this? From the largest to the smallest, I have created it. What can you possibly know about why I am doing what I am doing?"* This is Good News for Job and he relents in his calls to God. In his relenting, Job wins the bet for God that no matter what happens Job will retain his faith in God. God appeals to the vastness of Creation and, more so, to the mysteries of Creation itself, which are always a mirror for the mysteries of God, to calm Job's soul. Mystery, the unknown, is God's answer to Job's suffering. And for Job, it is satisfying. It is the good eating and rich food promised by God in Isaiah's word to us today.

And today we read about the fig tree. Jesus has given me time. Jesus has given us time. We have time to turn around and repent. We have time to acknowledge God's power and vision for each of us. We have time to reject the need of others to enact the judgment of God and presume to know God's mind. We have time, finally, to, as Isaiah says, *"...listen, so that you may live"* (Is 55:3). The mystery of God is like a market where you can buy good food without money, you can drink living waters, you can find a God who pardons, loves and cares for all of creation. This is Good News because the time we are given by the gardener, the one who has overcome the boundaries of death and oppression, the one who has fulfilled the promise of new life, means we can begin to see the future with hope, if only we will listen for it, if we only incline our ears to the Lord.

Isaiah says, *"For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace: the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial, for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off"* (Is 55:12-13).

The mystery of God, the ways of God which we do not know and the thoughts of God we cannot know, calls us to turn away from our need to be the judges of God's judgment. The mystery of God calls us to stand firm on the ground of our faith and to allow the compassion of Christ, the staying hand of God, to turn us away from our need to fill the unknown with our own power and ego. The mystery of God calls us to trust a higher

vision and a higher power, one which will tend to us and help us grow in such a way that we become agents of mystery, light, love and hope. Because regardless of what we want, regardless of the power we would seek to have over others and over creation itself, regardless of our need to control, *“the word that goes out from God’s mouth...shall not return to God empty, but it shall accomplish that which God purposes, and it shall succeed in the thing for which God sent it”* (Is 55:11 paraphrase).

Amen.