

Epiphany 5
February 4, 2018
Christ the King
Kenner

God Asserts Himself

Text: Isaiah 40:21-31

At the end of one of his poems, e.e. cummings asks God, "How should tasting touching hearing seeing breathing any - lifted from the no of all nothing - human merely being doubt unimaginable You?"

It's a great question. But the fact is, we "human merely beings" often have doubts about God. There are times in most of our lives when we may wonder where God is or even *if* God is. When it seems he's forgotten us or worse, abandoned us. Have you ever felt like that?

I don't want to dredge up bad memories, but this is a rather common human predicament. When we're out there on a storm-tossed sea like the disciples in the Bible, afraid our boat will be swamped and we may drown, yet Jesus is sleeping right through it. That's when the disciples shouted, "Lord, don't you care if we perish!" Well, we know he came to their rescue, but we're not always so sure he'll come to ours. There are times when we've prayed harder than ever before in our lives, yet been met with what someone called, "the awful silence of God."

Such dark nights of the soul can be brought on by medical conditions, accidents, grief, the loss of job or financial security, you name it. Overwhelming reversals of fortune can lead to spiritual anxiety as well. In explaining the sixth petition of the Lord's Prayer, "deliver us from evil," Luther said we're praying that we might not lapse into false belief or despair. Either

the false belief that God isn't loving, but is angry and punishing us, or the despair which says there is no God to either love or punish us.

Throughout Scripture we see people looking desperately for signs of God's care and concern; some evidence that's he's paying attention to what's happening in their lives.

Think of the Hebrews when they were slaves in Egypt. When God caught Moses' attention with the burning bush, God told him, "I have seen the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry. . . Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them" (Exodus 3:7-8). Isn't that what everyone in distress yearns for?

But there are other times in Scripture when God doesn't seem to see or hear or know or care. We think of Job especially, how he suffered, not just the loss of everything that mattered to him but the painful silence of God through it all. Yet after pleading with God and waiting for what seemed an eternity, God finally broke his silence and called out to him from the whirlwind. But when he did, it wasn't pretty. God didn't speak a kind, compassionate, tender word of consolation. What did he do? He shouted Job down. God summoned his authority and set the record straight. Job, Chapter 40: "And the Lord said to Job, 'Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? Anyone who argues with God must respond. . . Gird up your loins like a man; I will question you. . . Will you put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me that you ,may be justified? Have you an arm like God, and can you thunder with a voice like his?'" God even becomes sarcastic, asking, "Where were you when I laid the foundation of

the earth. Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined it's measurements - surely you know! Or who stretched the line upon it? On what were its bases sunk, or who laid its cornerstone?" (38:4-7).

Finally, Job says to God, (and I often quote this when Deborah thinks I've said something wrong) "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know. . . Therefore I despise myself and repent" (42:3 & 6).

Well, in today's First Reading God responds to the Hebrews in exile in similar fashion. He says (Isaiah 40:21-31),

Have you not known? Have you not heard?
 Has it not been told you from the beginning?
 Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?
 It is he who sits above the circle of the earth,
 and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers;
 who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,
 and spreads them like a tent to live in;
 who brings princes to naught,
 and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.

Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown,
 scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth,
 when he blows upon them, and they wither,
 and the tempest carries them off like stubble.

To whom then will you compare me,
 or who is my equal? says the Holy One.
 Lift up your eyes on high and see:
 Who created these?
 He who brings out their host and numbers them,
 calling them all by name;
 because he is great in strength,

mighty in power,
not one is missing.

But then comes this promise:

Why do you say, O Jacob,
and speak, O Israel,
'My way is hidden from the LORD,
and my right is disregarded by my God'?
Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.
He gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.
Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;
but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.

This is a great passage to remember when you're uncertain of God's presence or care. You might even want to memorize it. It's worth it.

But ultimately God wanted to do more than declare his presence and his care and concern for us. He wanted to show it in person.

So in today's Gospel we see Jesus healing the many sick and diseased folks in the town of Capernaum. And remember, this was when most illnesses were chronic and soon became terminal. When word spread that Jesus had cured Simon Peter's mother-in-law, the whole city gathered around the door, all these

sick people begging for help, asking for God's mercy. And in Jesus they received it.

So do we. Lent begins in just ten days. That's the season of the church year during which we meditate upon God's unimaginable and dramatic response to human need - our need - for his grace, mercy. We'll follow Jesus to Jerusalem, to the Garden of Gethsemane and then to the cross where his love for us will kill him.

But even that won't be the end of his love for us.

We end with the Prayer of the Day:

*Everlasting God, you give strength to the weak and power to the faint. Make us agents of your healing and wholeness, that your good news may be made known to the ends of your creation, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord.
Amen.*