

6th Sunday after Pentecost-Proper 10-Year A- The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony 7.12.20
 Isaiah 55:10-13, Psalm 65: (1-8), 9-14, Romans 8:1-11, Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

There is a chapter in one of my books of theology entitled “belief, doubt and sacred ambiguity. I was drawn to the chapter because it seemed to say it all and at the same time these the aspects seem to be at odds with one another. How can a theologian put together belief and doubt in the same sentence and then toss in ambiguity that is in some way sacred? The chapter did not answer that question but it did have rather interesting things to say about all three.

First, belief is, according to the author, not an intellectual affirmation. It is not what we think with our minds. Belief at its root comes from a Greek term which literally means to give one’s heart to. Belief is only secondarily about the mind. It only engages the mind when we try to articulate that to which we have given our heart.

Isaiah, as a prophet who heard the word of God, would have understood the distinction. Prophets hear with their hearts and only when they try to communicate what they have heard to others does the word engage the mind. True prophets do not try to explain or justify the word. They are the poets of the sacred. The task of the prophet is not so much to communicate information but rather to establish the terms of the relationship between God and human beings. In many cases they were hounded and abused for saying what no one wanted to hear.

The word of God that Isaiah heard and that we heard this morning is a word of hope. It is a word from God the Creator to a people in deep, deep trouble and despair. Many years before, Babylon had conquered Judah, destroyed the Temple and left Jerusalem in ruins. The population was deported as slaves to a foreign country. Psalm 137 gives a flavor of what they felt. “By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept, when we remembered you O Zion.” “How shall we sing the Lord’s song upon an alien soil?” It seemed as if God had turned God’s back on the people. There seemed to be no hope for the future. All of God’s promises seemed to have been rescinded and there was despair.

And then, as these things happen, a new power arose in the land. Babylon was defeated by the Persians. This new power had a different policy with regard to conquered people. The Israelites were allowed to return to Judah, to restore the Temple, rebuild Jerusalem and to resume the worship of God. The work of rebuilding would be hard, but they could see a future and it was a time of promise and of hope. But for the hope to be fulfilled the people had to believe again. They had to once more give their heart to God in faith and trust. They had to leave behind what had become secure and step out into the unknown, hopeful future.

God is often described as speaking from a whirl wind and that is exactly what it must have felt like when God spoke to Isaiah. There was anxiety among the people. Do we go into the unknown or do we stay where at least we have bread to eat? This had happened once before, when they were slaves in Egypt and Pharaoh let them go. They spent forty long, hard years in the wilderness before they arrived at the promised land of God. Were they willing to do this again?

And so God spoke.

“Seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near.” “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor your ways my ways says the Lord.” The promise of those words was a different kind of security. It was a promise of God’s abiding presence. It was a

promise of joy at their going out and peace at their return. Now was the time to decide. And decide they did. Some people returned to their land, their city and their Temple and others did not have the courage to do so.

Remember the chapter title, Belief, Doubt and Sacred Ambiguity?

With any decision, any action out of the norm, doubt is sure to be a part.

When we listen for the word of God, we will not always get a clear message. There is often ambiguity, but when it is of God it is sacred ambiguity. Those who are most assured that they know exactly what God wants and what God is doing without any doubt are often proven wrong. Doubt is a part of giving your heart to something, it is a part of belief. When we give our heart to God we do so with appropriate fear and trembling, because the path is not laid out for us from beginning to end, the path is only visible one or maybe two steps at a time. Sacred ambiguity. We are asked by God to take those steps, without knowing the end result, only secure in the knowledge that we are following our heart. We may make mis-steps along the way, we may stray from the path but if we truly are focused on God and God's purpose God will make it come out right.

Today we find ourselves as a congregation and as a nation in a place that has much in common with the Jews of Babylon as they heard the word of God from Isaiah. We are in the middle of what has been described as two pandemics. The first, the virus is new and much is unknown about it. We are anxious, not knowing how long we might have to stay in the place of distance, masks, testing and all the rest. The second pandemic is much older and has arisen once again. This is the pandemic of racism. There are some parallels with the choices we now face and those faced by the people to whom Isaiah spoke. It is an anxious and unsettling time.

We have a choice, individually, as a congregation and as a nation. We can convince ourselves that things are not so bad and we have only to wait for things to go back to normal whatever normal is. Or we can address the two pandemics boldly and with hope again both individually and as a nation. "For the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater," We have the capacity and the ability to choose which path we will follow. We have the opportunity to be the seed that is sown, watered and harvested so that all may eat and be filled. God promises that if we go out in joy, together with hope and determination that we will return in peace. That is God's promise, and it is our choice to live it out in courage.

Belief, doubt and sacred ambiguity. That is I think where we find ourselves. Where ever we go from here if we go with God in joy we will return to a more God blessed place of peace. That is the hope of the future.