

Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany – Year B – The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony – 2.7.21

Isaiah 40: 21-32, Psalm 47: 1-12,21c, 1 Corinthians 9:16-23, Mark 1: 29-39

Some years ago, while I was working in Seattle and living in Port Ludlow, it began to snow in the late afternoon. I had a few things that absolutely had to be finished and then I left for the day. I crawled up I-5 to Edmonds, took the ferry to Kingston and began the slippery journey home with all the other commuters. It was dark and the headlights only showed the white blowing snow against the windshield, hypnotizing and blinding. I could see the taillights of the car ahead. Seeing them, it was calming to realize that I was not alone.

As I usually do in times of stress, I began to pray. The prayer wasn't elegant, didn't address God with good grammar. It was more of a conversation. "O.K. Lord this is scary, are you with me? Help me stay calm and pay attention to what I am doing. Help me stay on the road. Guard me and those around me from mishap. Protect us from the crazy drivers out here. Get me safely home." When I crossed the Hood Canal Bridge and continued on my way, I suddenly realized that I could not see any other car, no taillights, no headlights coming the other direction. I felt very alone.

My prayer became much more succinct. O.K. Lord, help. Just Help. I made it home, safely and in one piece. I remember sitting for a few minutes in the driveway saying simply thank you.

I tell you all of that because it is for me one of the many times I've felt closest to God. It's not always in times of stress, but it *is* always in times when I am brought to a focus outside of myself. It can be a beautiful sunrise, the baby I am about to baptize, or any number of other events in daily life. This is when I am most aware of God's presence in a real and personal way. The theological term is immanence. The presence of God in the world in ways we recognize.

It is what Isaiah is speaking of when he assures the people of Judah that if they will but be faithful, wait on the Lord, "...the Lord shall renew their strength, and they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint." Many years before the Babylonians had destroyed the Temple, ravaged the land and taken the people to live in a foreign place, where they did not know the customs and where they felt that God had abandoned them. They cried out to God in the words of the psalm "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. (137:1). "How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?" (137:4).

We have not been taken into exile by Babylon as were the Israelites to whom Isaiah was speaking. In a very real way though, we have been sent into a form of exile by what is happening around us. The virus has made us anxious, wary, and isolated. We are weary of masks and perhaps losing the strength of will and faith to continue. Beyond the fact of the pandemic, there is the rest of what is going on in the world. We hear of division, of threats, of conspiracy theories and of insurrection. We hear of violence at home and in the world. We are weary and wary. God can feel very far away from us at times like these.

When I think back to that snowy night and the drive home, I wonder why God seemed so close to me. I remember even in the middle of the drive softly laughing because I thought of the bumper sticker “God is my Co-Pilot.” Later, I saw another bumper sticker “If God is your Co-Pilot, change seats.” The two together have much wisdom.

I felt God closest when I knew I had little or no control over the weather, road conditions and whether I would slide into the ditch or not. My best option was to trust God and keep on driving. God truly did feel like my co-pilot because God seemed to be in the car with me. At some point, I realized that God ceased to be the co-pilot and we had changed seats. God was in charge not me. It was in realizing that fact and letting go of the falsehood that I was running things, that let me see the other side of God. I experienced God’s transcendence. It is what Isaiah was speaking of when he asked; “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?” God who is creator and lover of all that is, earth, sea and sky and everything, everyone who dwells therein. This is the same God who cares about me personally, who cares about you about every human being, every creature, cares for them personally.

I don’t often think mathematically, it is not my gift, but in expressions of immanence and transcendence, I think in terms of an equation. Immanence and transcendence equals God. It is because of transcendence that immanence is possible. Because God is all that is, above the circle of the earth, we who are like grasshoppers can depend on the promise that God knows us personally. In the words of Luke’s gospel, “Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God.” We are not forgotten by God, no matter where we find ourselves, no matter if we from time to time think we are in charge, no matter if from time to time we forget God. Luke goes on “Don’t be afraid, you are worth many sparrows.”

It is because God is immanent that we can have an experience of God that allows us to see the transcendent God and to recognize God’s power. It is difficult to speak of God’s transcendence because whatever we say, God is more, whatever we imagine, God is larger. The people of Judah who in Isaiah’s time had been taken into exile were discouraged, defeated, and feeling as if God had forsaken them. They began to feel that their all-powerful God was not so powerful after all, not more powerful than the gods of the Babylonians. The prophet, speaking the words that God gave him to speak, assured them that this was not so. God...”gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless.” We too may be feeling faint and powerless in the face of all that is happening in the world. We, too are assured by the words of God through the prophet, words for us as well as for those to whom they were first spoken. “...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.”

On that snowy night years ago, what I was doing was waiting on the Lord. My prayers of “help” and all the rest were prayers that put the results in the hands of God. That is what waiting on the Lord is all about. Doing what we know to do and putting the results in the hands of God.