

DISCOVERING GOD

Holy Trinity – Cycle C: Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31; Romans 5:1-5; John 16:12-15

One of my great joys in parish ministry is reading through parts of the Old Testament and New Testament with our youth. We spend a whole school year at it and a week in the summer at Confirmation Camp. Meeting once a week and intentionally straying off the path at Christmas and Easter does not provide the best continuity. But we hope that at the end of so-called Bible year, our youth have a working knowledge of the main characters and stories of the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament; and a familiarity with Jesus, his teachings, his miracles, his identity as God's Anointed, and his suffering, death, and resurrection in the New Testament. We also try to spend time in the Book of Acts, and examine the life and writings of Saint Paul.

What is true about this kind of survey of the Bible is that we get to see people discovering God, encountering God, and naming or describing God. I tell our youth two things: first that the faith, as we have inherited it, proclaims one God, not the many gods characteristic of other cultures and societies at the time the Hebrew people were in spiritual formation; and that the God of the Bible is invisible, unknown, and, in many ways, unknowable. God calls to people, we read in the Old Testament; but their response is pure faith, because there is no image of God anywhere: idolatry is not part of the Hebrew religious system. And God's self-disclosure is always veiled, it seems: Moses' burning bush, the three strangers who come in from the desert to visit Abram and Sarai at Mamre; Elijah's still small voice. And so, there is an inherent difficulty in proclaiming a God that is only experienced and intuited, initially, by holy people.

But then, God becomes known through grace, we read. Abraham and Sarah have a child in their old age – an impossible promise fulfilled. And it happens again and again in this family: the impossible becomes possible. Grace walks right in and makes its home with Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, Joseph, and eventually, as we see in their deliverance from slavery in Egypt, the whole people of God's choosing. And God's promise for this people is that they will, somehow, make God known to all the peoples and nations of the world; that through the Hebrew people, God will bless the nations.

The promise is fulfilled in many ways, not the least of which in the faith and understanding the Hebrew people manifest concerning who they are as the children of God. They may be twelve tribes, they may be without a home they can call their own, but above and beyond anything else, they are those to whom God remains faithful the Bible shows us. God gives them laws through Moses. God gives them land through Joshua. God gives them prophets and judges and kings. God takes them home from exile. In many ways, the invisible and unknowable God is understood through forgiveness and grace, faithfulness and presence.

During the Babylonian Exile, the creation stories of Genesis were incorporated into the Book of Moses: if God was One, God was the Creator of the universe and all life. God was also the Spirit or wind that swept over the face of the waters when "the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep." This is wonderful, poetic language, but it expresses a profound faith born of the continuing discovery among the people of the truth concerning all of life and our experience of life. We do not merely exist, the authors of the Hebrew Bible persuade their readers, but we are called through the dust of our humanity to live and think and love and believe and endure; we are called to form a community, and then a community of communities in which God is recognized, understood to a degree, and worshipped because of the mystery that remains.

In the fullness of time, precisely in the fullness of time, God so loved the world that Jesus was born; God with us; the eternal Word given once and for all time, the gospel-writer John notes, through one human life whose singularity was and is undeniable. With great humility, Jesus revealed God's love for people, for individual people and individuals in community as unbounded: there is no sin, no illness or disease, no alienation, no loss, and no death for which God's love is not sufficient. And Jesus taught, showed, and lived compassion and radical justice. "Love your enemies. Be servants of all and masters of none." Name sin and evil, and you shall have power over it, he showed us with his very life.

Today we pause and refresh ourselves with the understanding we have received of who God is and who we are because of God. We need to do this, because so much of the time we live as if God is not present but absent in our world; we live in denial that we are accountable before God by being accountable to one another for how fairly and justly we treat one another. Too often we live as individuals with rights and privileges we have earned and now deserve, rather than as individuals in community who are called to love one another as we love ourselves. In so many ways, our corporate worship declares regularly our will to love God. But it is the gospel that reminds us we need more than good intentions: we love God by loving one another.

Our denial, our turning away from faith's call, our sin, suggests that, the gift of Holy Trinity notwithstanding, we are still discovering God.