

Palisades Presbyterian Church
Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
July 23, 2006

Reflection:

Every now and then go away, have a little relaxation, for when you come back to your work your judgment will be surer. Go some distance away because then the work appears smaller and more of it can be taken in at a glance and a lack of harmony and proportion is more readily seen. - *Leonardo Da Vinci*

Readings: 2 Samuel: 6: 1 – 5, 12b - 19
Mark 6: 14 - 29

Hymns:	Hymn #2	Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus
	Hymn #274	O God of Earth and Space
	Hymn #538	Lord Dismiss Us With Thy Blessing

¡Tranquilo!

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There is no containing God. We all know that. But in many ways and places, God has become a titular head for the designs of those who would use God to further their own purposes or policies.

We have examples of this in almost every place we look, from extremists who believe God calls them to rid the world of the satans of the West, to those who believe they have been called by God to carry the banner of democracy throughout the world. It is, in a way, an Old Testament landscape of good versus evil, the righteous vs. the sinners.

Our world religions have more often than not imposed themselves upon the faithful with the notion that religious institutions and their leaders somehow possessed the greater reserves of knowledge and divine inspiration than those they were called to lead. They knew what God wanted and they were going to be sure they told you. And, if you didn't listen, didn't behave as they demanded – your rights and privileges of membership would be revoked, you would be dropped at the nearest bus stop, and they would continue on with their mission of righteousness and salvation.

In this setting, as in some quasi-religious-political-historical-science fiction thriller, righteousness becomes its own hero, ideology masquerading as faithfulness –

exerting itself on believers and non-believers alike – using its power, authority, and calculation to get what it wants, what it sees as right, no matter the cost.

This week, stem-cell research legislation, legislation that would have furthered the potential of advanced healing for millions – was summarily vetoed by the president, the first veto of his tenure. Because? Because “he did not want to destroy life in the name of science.”

"This bill would support the taking of innocent human life in the hope of finding medical benefits for others," Bush said after rejecting calls that he change his policy. "It crosses a moral boundary that our decent society needs to respect."

So, if you are in favor of stem-cell research, closely connected to a woman's right to choose, then you are not a member of our decent society? According to whom?

"I think history will look very unkindly on this veto," said Rep. Chris Shays, a moderate Connecticut Republican who helped pass the legislation. "I believe the president is very sincere in vetoing this bill, but I think that he's been captured by his own ideology and taking his ideology to an extreme."

And, yet, where is the decency and moral balance in refusing to join the world in the Kyoto Treaty on the environment because of the cost to business; or denying LGBT folk equal rights because of a limited definition of family and marriage. Position based on the same ideology that mistakenly sent us into a war that has taken 2564 lives of Americans as of July 22, with an estimate of 40,000 – 44,000 Iraqi deaths.

All initiated and defended on inaccurate and contrived intelligence. Intelligence used to further an ideology that began in Afghanistan and promises to intensify into Iran, S. Korea. The same ideology that is willing to resist calling for a moderation in the war in Southern Lebanon, because it suits the nation's goal of destroying Hezbollah in the name of terror, regardless of the civilian casualties and proven ineffectiveness of war to stop wars.

CNN: President Bush on Saturday slammed Syrian and Iranian support for Hezbollah and underscored U.S. support for the Israeli reaction to the provocations by the Shiite guerrillas in Lebanon.

"For many years, Syria has been a primary sponsor of Hezbollah and it has helped provide Hezbollah with shipments of Iranian-made weapons," Bush said in his weekly radio address on Saturday.

"Iran's regime has also repeatedly defied the international community with its ambition for nuclear weapons and aid to terrorist groups. Their actions threaten the entire Middle East and stand in the way of resolving the current crisis and bringing lasting peace to this troubled region."

Righteousness and ideology have only one goal, like the institutions that embody them – to protect themselves in real or metaphorical fortresses that assure their survival at all costs – at all costs. There is no question about being wrong, no wavering about what is right, no ambiguity. This is the way it is and the way it will be. If you disagree, well, you are at best misinformed or liberal; at worst unpatriotic.

Even prophets are not immune to such influence.

Nathan, caught up in the sphere of David the great conqueror and king – is addressed by David in such a way as to suggest David has become God's representative on earth and would now be "handling God" like some spin doctor or public relations expert.

The text quickly shows what happens when one speaks for God; when hubris reaches the level of co-opting God in the headiness of power and ego.

David compares himself to God in such a way as to become guilty or condescending toward God – hard to tell – when he tells Nathan the prophet: Look at me living in this house of cedar and poor God – in the ark – in the tent.

Nathan, deferring to David the King, says, "Yes, David. You are right. Go do all that you have in mind for God is with you." Build God a house that is worthy of God.

Well, how could you ever do that, I wonder? To achieve such a thing, don't you have to know God to such a degree that in the process you become and exceed God? How could anyone know to such a degree what is truly good for another, let alone for God?

And God, not directly to David, but through Nathan, lambasts the king. "Who are you to decide where and how I will live? Who are you to attempt to contain me in this place of yours as though I were some trophy, standing by your side, there for everyone to see your righteousness? Who are you to use me to further your status and influence among and above others?"

At the end of the reading, the writer makes it clear who is in charge, when it is written:

"Moreover, the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house," not the other way around.

How did David get into such a dilemma, not seeing the arrogance that had grown in him? How did it have influence even upon the prophet?

It's hard to say what it is that gets inside of us that make us think we are so important. In fairness, I think such stridency and errant ways can be generated by "finally getting to a place where you believe you can have some real influence in making things better." It may just be that the more power that one has or perceives they have turns on an overproduction of endorphins, with a false sense of self – inflated even more by the praise of those around you – creating a savior, a savior who sees his or her self as right, and righteous, and not to be deterred by those who are not moral or decent, in their eyes.

EGO – Easing God Out.

Well, you know what I think? I think ¡Tranquilo! Is the answer. It's time to chill. Time to stop and take inventory. To arrest the madness that has brought back the body count to the evening news, the rockets red glare as if it were some new national sport, and the somewhat familiar strains of colonization and imperialism at the hand of superpowers and democracies.

As we talked about it last week, Jesus did all his work locally. Certainly there was chaos all around him, but he went about with his disciples in the work and the mission that was before them. It makes sense and look at the influence he had!

It is easy to feel impotent, frustrated, depressed, and ineffective in the face of the problems of society and the world at large. It's easy to feel like A-Rod against what seem to be insurmountable odds and masses of critical voices. It's just as easy to feel like David when you have the power of a nation behind you, forgetting that you are really not in charge.

Jesus knew this. Knew this all. In this morning's reading, he leads the disciples away from the headiness and the weariness of their work that creates both heroes and villains. Jesus knew that the only real change came from prayer and community, listening for ways to be of service to all of God's creation, not imposing one's beliefs or practices on others, rather welcoming them as Christians, because that's what Christians do.

The break in this narrative was short, only a boat trip across the lake, before they were once again surrounded by throngs. The imagery is wonderful, a handful of disciples in a boat, surrounded by a world seeking Good News and healing.

Maybe taking all the world leaders who would send their people to war, putting them in the same boat and sending out into the middle of the lake, with instructions to do nothing but breathe and rest among each other and look at all those around them – those whom they were called to serve by the maker of the lake and the boat – maybe that would help.

I don't know, but I do know that we all feel the pressure of this world and our local efforts to be a faithful and caring community. I know that it is sometimes wearing and overwhelming.

So in the midst of it all, all the turmoil, unrest, and ideological that defies logic –

“Come away and rest a while,” as Jesus says. Let rest here and in the times together; let's rest a bit in the presence of God and unburden our hearts to the one that made them and the houses we live in.

There will be plenty to do when we get to shore.

Peace, Shalom, Salam, Tranquilo! – for the ways of peace are many.