

Palisades Presbyterian Church

***Twentieth-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time***

October 15, 2006

On Reflection:

"In our baptism, God has turned to us so that we might turn to [God]. Daily we turn, responding to what God is doing in us. We respond to the Spirit's urging within our lives. In fact, the response itself (faith) is part of the Spirit's work in us.... The Spirit is not optional equipment for Christians.... The Holy Spirit permeates the Christian's existence, begins the Christian's pilgrimage, and leads us daily, tugging at our lives until they be fully turned toward God. There is no conversion, repentance, good work, or good life which is not a gift of the Spirit."

--- William Willimon, in "Remember Who You Are"

Readings: Job 23:1-9, 16-17

The Gospel of Mark: 10: 17 - 31

Hymns: #494 Out of Deep, Unordered Water

#481 Praise the Lord, God's Glories Show

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*Hic Jacet*

(With thanks and references to Frederick Buechner and

Secrets in the Dark pp.162 ff)

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I remember a time in my late teens and early twenties when all I wanted was for the pain to go away. I can't begin to describe what it was like to feel so helpless and lost, perhaps, you know what I mean.

I sought God, God did I seek God. All I could find was dogma, almost alien to what I was feeling or needed. I didn't yet know anything then about a personal God, and the ensuing conflict was huge. While the outside continued to look pretty good, my insides were never, ever at peace.

I remember the story of St. Francis of Assisi, giving everything away and going off to a life of service to God. I thought about it; I did. I guess I talked about it a bit, too, because I remember friends of mine honestly being concerned that I was going to do such a thing.

Still, seeking answers in religion and faith – then and now – is important to me. It was never that God was not around, it was just that I couldn't figure a way to make contact, get the answers, and go on happily with my life.

I came across a chapter in Frederick Buechner's book Secrets in the Dark called "Two Narrow Words." It starts out with part of this morning's reading from Job:

Then Job answered: Today also my complaint is bitter; his hand is heavy despite my groaning. Oh that I knew where I might find him,...and fill my mouth with arguments.... If I go forward, he is not there; or backward, I cannot perceive him; on the left he hides, and I cannot behold him; I turn to the right, but I cannot see him... If only I could vanish in darkness, and thick darkness would cover my face!"

Buechner follows with another reading, this time from Paul in his Second Letter to the Corinthians 1:8-10

We do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were utterly, unbearably crushed that we despised life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death so that we would rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He who rescues us from so deadly a peril will continue to rescue us; on him we have set our hope that he will rescue us again.

From the despair of Job, lost; to a crushing demoralizing experience in Asia – both stories lead to God for help. Out of the depths...

Juxtapose Sir Walter Raleigh's words at the end of *History of the World*, flat and eloquent in the language of fatalism:

O eloquent, just and mighty Death! Whom none could advise, thou hast persuaded; what none hath dared, thou hast done; and whom all the world has flattered, thou only has cast out of the world and despised. Thou has drawn together all the far-stretched greatness, all the pride, cruelty, and ambition of man, and covered it over with these two narrow words: *hic jacet*.

Hic Jacet, latin for "Here Lies."

I wonder if Job and Paul ever felt like that. "Is this it?"

I have, well – almost.

Everyone's way on the path we share is a bit different. It never felt to me like the answers came easily. Some of the most important things I have learned have been in those desert places and the trials that often led me there.

Tell you the truth, I have never really been all that big on the notion of suffering in a religious or any other context. I have learned, though, that without the tribulation, the chance or possibility to move from a dogmatic view of religion and God to a religion and God that is alive in one's faith and revelation – is not possible. In other words, I had to be stretched to reach out to God.

Returning to the readings, Job is a difficult text in many ways.

- The notion of God and Satan betting on humans as if we were horses at the track.

- A seemingly good and just man, experiencing tragedy that was reserved only for the sinful
- theodicy: if God is good how does God, who created everything, allow such bad things to happen.

And all those are important discussions. But, this morning, I am thinking of Job and Mark together, trying to make connections.

What appears common to me is that they are stories about focus, written – in part -- in the language of wealth and rewards. By all accounts, Job's transgressions are small and the punishment – extreme. None of what happens to Job makes any sense to him. Job simply cannot balance it out.

In Mark, the rich man comes to Jesus and asks what he needs to do to get the rewards of heaven. Jesus tells him. When the man says that he does all that Jesus has said, Jesus responds with a directive to give all his possessions away and follow. The man, who probably should have quit while he was ahead, leaves perplexed, saddened, maybe even despairing. The rich man simply cannot balance it out.

I don't always balance it out so well, myself – but I have learned that the nexus of the dilemma – for me – is always in the focus on God, staying present, praying always for the knowledge of God's will and the ability to carry that out.

What gets in the way of a close and intimate relationship for me with God – are distractions and striving for a relationship that can be explained and quantified, rather than a life lived out in knowing and seeking God.

In other words, “Got money?” or for Paul “Got converts?” – cool, all is well.

It's a tricky thing to measure God's presence by success or the lack of success, by any measure. In fact, I think it is the most fallible of all things to attempt.

The duality and fear causes the trouble: the attempt to hold on to what we have, while letting ourselves go into God's hands. The fear is in being afraid of losing what we have or not getting what we want.

That fear is on the lower level, the quantifiable level, so to speak.

The focus, though, the intimacy with God has little to do with any of that, except in how much it gets in the way of me, you, and God. It's not what we have or don't have, it's whether or not those needs and wants cause us to move more closely or further away from God.

So, how do we keep that focus and intimacy with God? Well, in a lot of ways. For me, things seem to regularly happen that remind me just how much I rely upon God – bring God back into focus. ..

Daily prayer and meditation. Joyful places! Such as here especially on a morning like this when we welcome Sophie into the Christian community of God-seekers.

Or early this morning, when I got here, out side the church before the light sensor went off , when I looked up and saw the stars and the moon and felt the magnetic pull, the longing toward awe and mystery and goodness and peace and God – I remembered then, too, and asked for help today.

Funny how simple things, turning toward God in simple ways, can change an entire day.

If I don't pay attention to these and other things as "God" - Sic Hacet would have described the place of my own design in which I would reside.

Instead of "Here lies," "Here lives!" the Spirit of God moving us every God and service to one another in this community we share, today increased by one named Sophie, and many more elsewhere. And it is about the children, about

Sophie, those in church school, and about the child-like wonder and trust in God that we all need to embrace. Embrace....

A friend and professor of mine, The Rev. Minka Shura Sprague penned a book called Praying from the Free Throw Line. She writes of this child-like quality in a piece called "Picture This."

(Here followed a reading and closing to this morning's comments. If you would like a copy, please contact me: [ppc10964@verizon.net](mailto:ppc10964@verizon.net) )