

God Whispers

Monday morning's paper ran a very long article about a number of mega churches and smaller evangelical churches.

They have become the rallying places for folks insisting that the election was stolen from Mr. Trump.

That the country is heading in entirely the wrong direction.

As you can imagine, these rallying places include an awful lot of shouting and yelling, along with feelings of deprivation and entitlement.

All wrapped up in the gospel and the flag.

The thing is, no matter your political perspective, God's voice can't be heard in the shouting.

Indeed, if our faith has taught us anything over these many years, it's that God whispers.

Like the whispering Elijah heard as he's hiding out in the cave, when the still small voice breathes its wisdom to him.

Or that midnight encounter between the angel Gabriel and Mary.

Announcing the world-changing events about to occur in the silence of her room.

To the mystery of the resurrection.

That private affair.

First, just between Jesus and the Father.

Now, being shared with the apostles.

Which brings us to this morning, as God's whisper sits on a sandy beach.

At first incognito.

And then, recognized, because of yet another whisper.

"Children, throw your nets over the other side!"

Which John, the beloved disciple, immediately remembers as the same instruction Jesus gave to them the first day they met.

When they'd fished all night long.

Catching nothing.

When the stranger on the shore tells them:

"Throw your nets on the other side."

And stunningly, there's a haul of fish so huge that the boat nearly drowns.

God usually whispers.

God rarely shouts.

And if we're to hear that intriguing voice, we need to get comfortable with whispers.

Another article in that same morning paper provided a wonderful discussion about the very thing that helps get us to that place of being open to whispers.

It was a very insightful article about grief.

Focusing mostly on the grief that comes when we've lost someone whom we love dearly.

I wish some of those insights had been available to me some 30 years ago as I was struggling with my own grief.

One thing that seems to be so common with grief is not understanding that when your world falls apart, you can't just paper over the devastation.

Something new has to be created, almost from scratch.

Which usually occurs only after a long time of sitting on the ash heap of what once was.

A new story needs to be told.

One that makes sense out of a life whose pillars are ripped away.

Maybe it's the loss of a spouse, child, or parent.

Maybe it's the loss of innocence through trauma that impacts so many of our young people.

Devastation, it seems, is often the entry ticket, the price to be paid, to develop the ears that can hear the gentle whisper of God.

Isn't that what the apostles are dealing with on the beach this morning?

This isn't the first time they encounter the risen Jesus.

In fact, it's almost the last time.

In those encounters, each of the disciples have to confront their own devastation.

The bravado and boasting that bled out in all that chest thumping before Jesus's arrest.

"We will never leave you!"

"We will fight to the death for you!"

All that macho talk, dissolved into a puddle of fear.

Through denial.

Abandonment.

Betrayal.

Each of them, as each of us will most likely do at some point in our lives, face the fact that we are utterly, irredeemably, and forever, broken human beings.

And yet, it's precisely in the midst of that brokenness, that the whispered word of God reaches in.

Enfolds us.

And heals us.

It doesn't happen quickly.

Sometimes it seems that it may never happen.

But it will.

If only we might quiet ourselves

And stay open to the whisper.

It's there in that conversation between Jesus and Peter.

Three times, Jesus asks Peter: "Do you love me?"

And three times Peter replies: "I love you."

And yet, more is going on than meets the eye.

Because something really essential gets lost in the translation.

Like the Eskimos, who have 100 words for ice, the Greeks have many words for love.

And in the Greek, the first two times that Jesus asks Peter "do you love me," he uses the Greek word "agape."

"Do you agape me?"

Which means, "do you love me as God loves?"

Freely?

Fully?

Without conditions?

And twice Peter responds, "I 'philio' you."

I love you as a human being.

With all of my limits and fears and conditions.

So the third time Jesus asks, Jesus meets Peter where he is, by asking:

"Do you philio me?"

"Yes Lord," is Peter's reply.

The God who whispers meets us where we are.

Freeing us to face the truth about ourselves.

Yes, the good.

But also the bad.

And don't forget the ugly!

Yet in the facing, we are given the grace to see, it's enough.

In Jesus, we meet the God who humbles himself to the point of becoming a short order cook on a sandy beach.

We meet the God who stoops to wash our feet.

The God who surrenders everything to live among us.

Who dies for us.

And this unexpected God says to every human person,

"You are accepted.

You are accepted by that which is greater than you, the name of which you don't know.

Don't ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later.

Don't try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much.

Don't seek for anything.

Don't intend anything.

Simply accept the fact that you are accepted." Tillich.

Because if the one who holds all things together becomes not only one of us, but comes as one of the least of us, what's that say to our pretensions for power?

For wealth?

For fame?

What does that say to our persistent temptation to ignore the destitute, the widow and the orphan?

"To know the incarnate God is to see ourselves as we really are: trapped in sin — and encased in the lonely castles built of our own pride.

It means confessing our own complicity in the hells we find ourselves in and have made on earth." Charles Moore, Plough, No.7.

And more than this, it means spending ourselves on behalf of the poor.

On those who exist at the margins of society.

On those at the end of their rope.

It means recognizing that as we stand before God, we are all takers, none are makers.

And knowing this, perhaps our hearts can soften and our eyes can open to those around us who are in need.

"Is this not what it means to know me,' says the Lord, 'to defend the cause of the poor and the needy?" (Jer. 22:16).

The God who whispers meets us precisely in the empty, pain-filled, godforsaken places of our lives.

The God who whispers meets us in our nakedness.

Precisely because God's aim is to defeat every godforsaken part of our lives.

Not through coercion or punishment.

But through love.

Through mercy.

Asking only in return that we extend the same to one another.

Whoever and wherever we are, no matter what hell we find ourselves in, Jesus descends to us and invites us to descend with him.

And lo and behold, what we come to see is that in our depths, the divine heights are revealed.

Are you suffering from loss or grief or trauma?

Are the ever demanding challenges of growing older, or the ever-growing challenges of entering into adulthood, causing you to tremble?

If they are, you're on the right path.

But take just a moment.

Quiet yourself.

As you listen for the God who whispers.

This God who knows you by name.

Who has loved you before your first breath.

Who will bring you home to joys and wonders — beyond imagination.

+amen

