

Cleaning House

Just last Saturday many of us spent a good part of the day cleaning house here at the church.

Gum and paint was scrubbed off of tables and chairs and sidewalks, the parking lot got power washed, brass was shined and windows washed and the bride's room got a nice dusting and airing out.

I mention this today because, as we get so near to the celebration that begins in just 2 1/2 days, this cusp of Christmas and all that it means, is also a good time for some personal and community housecleaning when it comes to our own ideas about who and what Jesus is, and about who and what God is, and what God is not.

Over the course of our lives, all of us, when it comes to these questions, end up with gum stuck to our beliefs, or paint marks, with dust and mold and grease and grime that can use a good scrubbing.

We live in a society that every day worships a small "g" god that has no relationship at all to the God of the Older and Newer Testaments, and so we are all contaminated, to one degree or another, by the small "g" god that our society seems so much in love with.

The word itself: "God" has so many meanings to so many people, often meanings that cause more harm than good.

Our friends in Alcoholics Anonymous are really quite ingenious because they don't talk about God at all.

They talk about a higher power.

And they use the words "higher power" rather than the word "God" because they know that once a drunk has been beaten up enough to seek the help of recovery, his or her ideas about God are often completely clogged with hurtful baggage.

You know what I'm talking about.

The folks raised in homes where God is the terrifying monster pulled out by parents to make the kids behave; or the guilt monitor who is just waiting for you to mess up so he can knock you down, these ideas about God have sent more than a few folks running, not walking, from our pews.

But it's not only the terrifying god that gums up the works of real faith.

For the more socially progressive, for we modern folks, God is often reduced to a combination of magic, therapy and deism.

Magic, as in when we need a miracle, as in: "God, if you just get me out of this one, I'll never do it again!"

Therapy as in: "God just wants us to be nice, to play by the rules, to get along with others."

Deism as in: "God exists, but she is very, very, far away, and frankly couldn't care less about any of us."

These ideas are just some of the gum and ink stains and dust and grease that attaches itself to our notions of faith and so today, just a few short days until we celebrate the most remarkable mystery in the history of the world, we come to scrape off the gunk, to seek a truer glimpse, a more honest peek, at the Mystery that we call God, with a capital "G".

And as we seek, if it helps you, it's okay to just let go of the word "God."

It's okay to put that word, with all of its baggage, on the shelf, and maybe start thinking in terms of something like, shall we say, infinite and inexhaustible depth.

Because, our word "God" is simply the name we attach to infinite and inexhaustible depth.

"That depth is what the word 'God' means." Tillich, quoted by Haught in What is God? at 14-15. paraphrased.

It's why in Exodus, as Moses stands confused and amazed, the voice that speaks to him introduces himself not as 'God', but as "I Am Who I Am" or "I Will Be Who I Will Be."

It doesn't get deeper than that, does it?

The Mystery that we call God is that which quietly, humbly, yet lovingly, calls us out of ourselves and beyond ourselves so that one day we might become ourselves.

You might feel this pull whenever you are dissatisfied with your life, whenever you move into new and unexplored territories, whether those territories be physical, mental, emotional or spiritual.

A poet who spent a lifetime wrestling with the truth of the living Mystery that we call God looked closely at all of creation and saw that:

"Blowing through heaven and earth, and in our hearts, and in the heart of every living thing, is a gigantic breath, a great Cry, which we call God.

Plant life wished to continue its motionless sleep next to stagnant waters, but the Cry leaped up within it and violently shook its roots:

'Away, let go of the earth, walk!'

Had the tree been able to think and judge, it would have cried: 'I don't want to.

What are you urging me to do?

You are demanding the impossible!'

But the Cry, without pity, kept shaking its roots and shouting, 'Away, let go of the earth, walk!'

It shouted in this way for thousands of eons; and lo! as a result of struggle and desire, life escaped the motionless tree and was liberated.

Animals appeared, worms, making themselves at home in water and mud.

'We're just fine,' they said.

'We have peace and security; we're not budging!'

But the terrible Cry hammered itself pitilessly into their loins.

'Leave the mud, stand up, give birth to your betters!'

'We don't want to.

We can't!'

'You can't, but I can.

Stand up!'

And lo! after thousands of eons, man emerged, trembling on his still unsolid legs.

The human being is a centaur, (half man and half horse), his hoofs are planted in the ground, but his body, from breast to head is worked on and tormented by the merciless Cry.

He has been fighting, again, for thousands of eons, to draw himself, like a sword out of his animalistic scabbard.

Man calls in despair, 'Where can I go, I have reached the pinnacle, beyond is the abyss.'

And the Cry answers,

'I am beyond.

Stand up!' Kazanzachis, Letter to Greco.

God is both the source and answer to the infinite longing we each of us feel for wholeness and peace and joy.

God is the far horizon toward which we are all moving; and yet, God is also completely near, closer than our own heart beat, nearer than the breath you just took in.

So what response does this God ask from us?

At the end of the day, it's not an expectation for magic or miraculous cures or supernatural interventions that rescue us from life's catastrophes.

It's not even morality that's expected, behaving well so we can punch our own ticket to whatever after-life there may be.

The response God beckons from us is faith: it is the giving over of ourselves to the deep, to the Cry, to the endless horizon that is also the ground and substance of all things: as in Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, as the daily way in which we offer up our lives.

A disciple asked the great mystic Meister Eckhart how one knew when one was being true to the will of God: the reply,

"It's often the case that what seems trivial to us is very important to God.

Therefore, treat equally everything God puts on you, not comparing and wondering which is best or more important....but rather simply follow where God leads, by doing what you feel most inclined to do, going where you feel you must go, pursuing that to which you feel most drawn.

If we live in this way, God gives us his greatest in our least and never fails."
(paraphrased)

From the beginning of time, the Mystery we call God beckons us into the deep, into the mystery that is the far horizon, and the solid ground of all that is.

In a little less than 3 days, we shall celebrate God's calling of us into the depths through the unforeseeable mystery of God coming near, oh so near, to us.

The great beyond stoops, and hugs each of us close.

Allow me to leave you with this.

A woman, now a bishop in the Methodist Church, told me this story a few years ago.

As a youngster in very rural Texas, she is following her mother home one night, carrying water from the well that is far from home.

It happens during that long walk home, late at night.

The luminous glow from the Milky Way is the only light.

Her mom walks quickly up ahead, and soon the girl is alone.

She's frightened.

She feels utterly alone.

Then she begins to get angry.

Angry at her mom for leaving her.

Angry at God for allowing it.

She starts to ask: "Where is God?"

She starts to ask if there even is a God.

Or is she, in the end, truly alone in the world?

Then, in the midst of all this worry and trembling, as she walks, lost, lonely and scared, it seems that the sky above her gently reaches down and with something like arms, embraces her, and with something like a voice, whispers to her: "You are not alone."

The deep calls us out of ourselves and the deep becomes one of us, so that we, and the deep, may be one.

God calls us out of ourselves and God becomes one of us, so that we, and God, may be one.

This is the heart of our faith.

This is the miracle of Christmas.

+amen

