

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany Year B February 15, 2009
2 Kings 5:1-14; Psalm 30; 1 Cor 9:24-27; Mark 1:40-45

Many of us have attended the adult education programs that Dan Kaiser has offered the last two Sundays. He has provided stories to read for these programs which has prompted all of us to ponder their meaning.

To introduce these stories in advance of our getting together, Dan gave us some thoughts to keep in mind as we read and discuss these stories. He said people attempt to give meaning and definition to the One who by very nature resists all of our attempts at reduction, depiction and categorization. How we have grown accustomed to thinking of God in terms borrowed from human experience.

All of this isn't just a recent development, but has been going on for thousands of years. The Psalms seem fertile ground for these attempts to think of God in terms of human experience. For instance today's psalm has "for his wrath endures but the twinkling of an eye" and "then you hid your face" or this "what profit is there in blood if I go down to the pit? Will the dust praise you or declare your faithfulness?" Or the similar phrase in psalm 88 which reads "will your loving kindness be declared in the grave? Your faithfulness in the land of destruction?" We humans enjoy praise, look for it, seek it out and therefore God must enjoy praise, look for it and seek it also. Bowing down or looking up to him? Does God really want that from us? Maybe so, I for one don't know how God thinks. I have some real doubts though. Would it make more sense to believe that to worship God we should love one another? That what God wants is that we treat each other with dignity, affection and respect? Seems like it might be a meaningful way of worshiping God.

In our Morning Prayer Service here at St Paul's, we usually say together the Prayer of St. Chrysostom. The line that has special meaning for me in that prayer is "Fulfill now, O Lord, our desires and petitions as may be best for us. best for us being the impact words. Do we too often think we know what is "best for us?"

I recently read a story about three fishermen out in a boat on a lake, when an angel appeared. One fisherman cried out “please help me with my long term back pain” and the angel healed him. The second fisherman said look at these thick glasses I must wear, please give me good eyesight, and the angel granted his wish. The third fisherman cried out “leave me alone, leave me alone, I am on disability”.

I jump to the conclusion that this man had a comfortable disability situation. It seems that his comfortable disability situation was more desirable than being healthy and facing an uncertain world. Was the disability that he wanted best for him? I have read about professional athletes who earned significant almost unbelievable incomes who twenty or more years later are deep in debt, maybe in poverty. They ran a race for the perishable prize. Did the athlete do what he wanted to do but not what was best for him? They went after the perishable wreath that was about as valuable as last years Christmas tree in March.

Naaman also had problems in understanding what was best for him. He too thought of God in terms of his own experience. In his position of being a mighty warrior he was often in control in getting people to do things his way. He probably believed that to be cured of leprosy required something spectacular or magical. He may have thought that when he came to Elisha that there might be tongues of fire or pillars of smoke, something he could understand. But to just wash in the River Jordon seven times? How ridiculous. Weren't there better and more convenient rivers in Damascus? He was thinking as a human with personal experiences. He could not, as mankind cannot, with the possible exception of a couple of religious zealots, think like God. If we cannot think like God, we are going to have problems knowing what is best for us. Katrina comes to mind.

As with a lot of scripture, more than one meaning can be found in the inspired words. Yes, we can concentrate on Naaman and his attitude as a person, but is it also possible that the message was telling the people that all people are God's chosen people, even Gentile strong willed warriors.

An unpleasant event may not be viewed as “best for us”. In these difficult times many people are losing their jobs. It can

have a significant impact on their self worth. Yet there are many stories about people who have said “it was the best thing that happened to me”. I understand that being laid off will not be a “best for me” experience for many people. Where it has been “best for me” may be because it made a person think of where they had been, what they had been doing and whether they wanted to continue along that path. Were they in a rut? Were their responsibilities enjoyable? They may have entertained going a different way, a way that was more fulfilling and rewarding. And with a little luck they succeeded in going a new satisfying way. Being laid off became a “best for me” experience.

This thread of self and viewing God’s words through our personal experiences found in our Old Testament and Epistle reading today continues in our Gospel Lesson. A leper came to Jesus and begged to be healed. Jesus stretched out his hand and healed him. Jesus then said “see that you say nothing to anyone”. And guess what happened. “But he went out and proclaimed it freely”. Now I can understand his joy of being made clean and wanting to proclaim his good fortune to everyone. But there is an unanswered question in the reading that I think is very important. Did he cry out “look at me, I am healed” or did he cry out “look what God has done for me.” Our personal experiences color our understanding of events.

I don’t believe we have much of an alternative. We are all influenced by our life experiences, which are not cast in stone. As life and experiences move on we have new experiences and I view that as good and I hope we move on with increased wisdom.

Earlier I mentioned the good luck of a person starting a successful new life journey. I have often wondered if luck might be the Divine interceding in our lives, but because of our worldly experiences, we just don’t get it.