

SPG#216, Pentecost 14B, Proper 18

September 6, 2009

Isaiah 35:4-7a

James 2:1-10, 11-13, 14-17

Mark 7:24-37

Once upon a time there was a man who, while in church one day, became deeply impressed with Jesus' words out of the New Testament, **Ask and it shall be given to you, seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened to you.** He was so impressed that when he prayed that evening, he asked God to help out with his mortgage payment that month, to see that his car got a new battery, to eliminate the pain in his hip from arthritis. And he thought while he was at it, he may as well go for broke. So he told God that he had been feeling a little down, and would He take away his blue mood. The next day, when he opened his mail, he discovered he had won a sweepstakes worth several thousand dollars. His neighbor came over and asked him to take a new car battery off his hands. It seems that his neighbor's son bought his Dad a new battery, but it was the wrong size. It happened to be just the battery the man needed for his car. So, he thanked his neighbor and took it. Later in the day, when he was doing some yard work, he slipped and fell while carrying some boards. When he got up, he realized that the pain in his hip was gone. After an hour or so he realized that his mild depression was gone.

Now this little story probably illustrates how we would like for God to respond to our needs, upon demand. And I believe that God answers all prayers, somehow, some way, but perhaps not in the way we expect. And so it often is before us to learn of God's way of answering, to learn of God's way of responding.

And that is good way to approach today's Old Testament reading from Isaiah. It is a short reading. So, let me read the whole thing again. **Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you."**

Then the eyes of the blind will be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water.

Now chances are that if one is struggling with mortgage payments, car batteries that go bad, arthritic pain, and mild depression, then the words I just read may seem foreign or disconnected. How much comfort is it to a person who is behind on their mortgage that God will come with vengeance? When times are bad, how much comfort is it that God can open the eyes of the blind? When times are bad, how much comfort is it that God can make the deaf here? I can recall over the years in my own tough situations, and in the tough situations of others where someone tried to offer encouragement by saying, "Don't worry about a thing. God is on your side." Or how about, "Times are tough now, but God always has a purpose." Now both those statements could be true. God is on our side. And God does have a purpose. But those statements can seem like platitudes to someone facing a thorny problem.

So, are we missing something here? Do the words in the Isaiah reading indicate something beyond face value? Or, ask the question from a different stand point.

When times are really tough, what do you need from those who love you? What do you need from God?

When I did some hospital chaplain's training years ago, I learned over time that within reason, what I said to people under stress was not of paramount importance. In other words, if someone was struggling with a loved one who was gravely ill, they were not likely to benefit from some drawn out statement about the goodness of God. What they did seem to appreciate was the fact that I was there, and that I was going to be with them in their hard time. And over the years, in different situations, even when I thought that what I had to say was eloquent and touching, the thing that was remembered most was that I was there with them.

Across the New Testament there are many examples of what I call the presence of God. Remember when Jesus said, "I will always be with you." In the funeral liturgy we quote him in the Prayer Book when we say, "I go to prepare a place for you, that where I am you may be also.

In the book of Job, back in the Old Testament, when Job had lost everything, his possessions, his family, he spends several chapters asking God why. Finally at the end of the book, he gets the answers to all his questions and struggles when he finds himself in the presence of God.

So it is this presence of God that seems to be a sticking point. And it seems hard for us to put in words.

When Saul, who became the Apostle Paul, met God on the Damascus Road in a blinding light, it was not God's great theology that impressed and changed Saul. It was God's presence.

So, when we hear words in the Bible like, "God will come and save you, The eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped," we need to know that more is being said than just a recitation God's mighty acts. For the writer, in using expanded language and examples, is speaking of being in the presence of God.

It seems that we humans just need to wrestle with ourselves before we can just accept that just having him near, feeling him near, is what we need.

Some questions to consider, In the presence of God would we allow that the one who opens the eyes of the blind will enable us to see in a way unforeseen and unprecedented? In the presence of God, would we allow that the one who unstops the ears of the deaf will enable us to hear and perceive as never before?

Would we allow that in the presence of God we could be loved as never before?

Would we allow that in the presence of God that we would be known as never before?

After we have wrestled with ourselves, those are some of the questions we face.

And so, after all is said and done, it is just that simple. It is being open to that presence.

It is knowing God. It is feeling God near. It is loving God and being loved by God.

Amen.