

“Beside Me”

Isaiah 29:13-16; 1 John 3:17-24;
Luke 12:4-12

Pastor Norman Fowler
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow
April 21, 2013

Over the past few weeks we have been thinking about who God is as creator and the wonder of what that means, the astounding nature of the world in which we live, and how we together see that world. We are amazed at who God must be. We spent one Sunday thinking about how amazing God is. Then we thought together about the nature of creation and what a gift it is that God has given us and that God, in some way, has enabled creation to work in a way that allows things to just flow and for us to be part of that and our decisions to fit into it and determine how things go. God is both incredibly vast and beyond our understanding, but has given us the gift of creation—a place to live, a dynamic and wonderful place.

There was a young man over at WSU who began to recognize all of that, to recognize that if there is a creator that gave us this creation perhaps he should get to know him. There's something about being created that leads us to think about the creator, who that is, and how do we find that one? When we think about a creator, we think about one who makes something. When we look at a creation, we can tell something about it. It's a little harder if were to step in and think of ourselves as the creation here. Would we know as much?

Let's go back to that idea of knowing the creator. I have a goblet here. It can be used for communion and it has a nice cross on it. So we know something about it. Sometimes we see something created and we don't quite understand it. We need to go to the creator and ask what it's about. Or we might want to go to the creator because it's a beautiful thing and we want to find out more about how the creator made it and why.

That's what this young man was thinking about. If there was a creator, if there was one who gave us this creation, might I know that one and where do I go to look? Some people have thought, “Yeah, there was a God that created everything and just set it spinning off and walked away.” However, if we begin to look at scripture—it doesn't take much looking—there is some description of how God is related to us. As we see how God worked in and through scripture, we begin to see something about the nature of our God. In the Gospel that we read today about Jesus speaking with his disciples, he talks about God knowing the sparrow, whatever sparrow there might be. Numbering the hairs of our heads—that's a pretty astounding way of thinking about God knowing us. Some of us don't have as many hairs for God to worry about anymore, but God knows us.

So at least God hasn't walked away and forgotten about everything. He pays attention. He's watching what's going on. However, I think if we even look cursorily at scripture, if we start at the beginning, what did God do with Adam and Eve? He walked with them in the garden. And even after things changed a bit, he still seemed to be present. He

came to Cain and asked, "Where's your brother Abel?" He kept up the conversation. Really, throughout scripture, we see God coming to people and interacting with them.

When I think about God as creator and think about creation and the dynamic nature of it, I do think that God set it up so that God doesn't have to always make all the decisions that are going on. But that doesn't mean that God isn't present and that God can't change the shape or nature of creation. God can change directions. We see it with Adam and Eve. We see it with Noah. Noah is one of those first stories where we see God saying "You guys are going off in the wrong direction and this needs a restart." Most of the time, God doesn't do quite as dramatic a restart. Even when the Israelites are slaves in Egypt, God doesn't come in and just by fiat wipe out the Egyptians and let his people go. He finds this guy wandering in the desert that he thinks will be able to do the job, meets him in that place, gives him a calling. It's almost like God is sending Moses to be an ambassador to negotiate the freedom of the Israelites. We know that escalates as it goes along, but God tries to work with God's people and for God's people. God is present.

God works through Moses, and if we keep going, God keeps working through people, inviting us. So it doesn't feel to me like God is manipulating everything to work as much as God is beside us, encouraging us, speaking into our lives, guiding us into the possibilities that are before us. Think about the prophets. Prophet after prophet comes to God's people and says "Amend your ways so it will go well with you." I do think that God set things up so there are good ways of living, so that when we do that it goes better for us. God comes along side. People don't listen to the prophets, and God, I think, encourages things to happen, changes the course of history. They go off to Babylon, and then return to try again.

In some ways, Jesus follows in that very trajectory, coming to speak into the lives of God's people. A lot of what Jesus does is teach, beginning to form a new community. Jesus does take the sins of the world with him onto the cross and to death, and then the rebirth of Christ, the resurrection, is about that restarting for us. It gives us a new life, a new direction, but even in that, it's an invitation.

It always makes me think of that rich young ruler who comes to Jesus and asks, "What must I do to have eternal life?" Jesus says, "Well, have you done all these things?" The young man says yes. Then Jesus says, "Go sell all your stuff and follow me." And he walks away. That feels to me like that's how God works with us. Are you going to listen or are you going to walk away?

Notice what the Isaiah passage was about. The people's hearts had gotten far from God. They weren't near to God and as a result of that, they weren't seeing what God would do with them. The discernment of the discerning wouldn't happen because they weren't near to God. I think there's a suggestion that God was near; it's the people that weren't getting near to God.

So as I follow this through, what it feels like to me is that God is incredible, immense, beyond my understanding, transcendent—all those ways of describing God. God has created this incredible creation for us to live in that is dynamic and wonderful. And it matters how we live. And in that, God has not gone away. God continues to come in, to speak into the world. Sometimes we talk about Jesus as the Word of God. It's God speaking into the world, into our lives, inviting us into the joy of God's grace, the wonder of God's love, and through that, recognizing that we, too, can live.

It leads me to think what is my part of this? If God is near, where am I? Do I let my heart be near? One of the problems Jesus said he was having comes out of Matthew 13:15: For this people's hearts have grown dull, their ears are hard of hearing, they have shut their eyes, so they might not look with their eyes and listen with their ears and understand with their heart, and turn and I would heal them.

It's amazing; God leaves so much up to us—to hear, to see, to turn—because God is here. God is present. Christ has come. The Spirit is among us. We get to listen. It might take some practice, but it's an invitation. God is near. Let's let our hearts be near to God.

Lord, help us recognize, as that young man did, that it is important to know our creator. The incredible thing is that not only have you given us this incredible creation, but you continue to come near. You have come to us in Christ to be the word to us. You have given your Spirit that it might continue to work among us, to help us hear what you would have us say and do. Lord, help us open our ears, our eyes, our hearts to you. As you come near let our hearts come near to you that we might know your way and the joy that that brings. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.