

FIFTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

February 5, 2012

Isaiah 40:21-31; Mark 1:29-39

The Work of Belief

I am an avowed Science Fiction reader. Just ask my husband. He's given up trying to find a decent blood splattered thriller in my pile of library books. He just finds another cataclysm brought on by a meteor or a plague and has to go back to the library for more mayhem.

My favorite authors of Science Fiction address the flaws and the strengths of humanity and the efforts of leaders to gather colonists or survivors into cohesive communities. Life is usually sustained through shared resources and enhanced through the efforts of surviving geniuses. Seldom, if ever, is religion a part of those new communities. No rabbis, priests, ministers or imams appear to have survived whatever the catastrophe and not one of the survivors appears to care. Religion is irrelevant in these post apocalyptic novels.

As I was reading one such book, I stopped and thought for a moment of life without religion, without God. I realized that I cannot picture such a life, and yet, our increasingly secular world is, without conscious awareness, deconstructing God. A recent example was laughingly ironic. Just before Christmas more than a thousand participants in Santa Claus suits ran for Make A Wish Foundation. Great idea, except that the organizers scheduled the race for Sunday morning. No one on the organizing

committee thought to warn the churches that Sunday Services would be impacted.

Parishioners on their way to Advent Services were inundated with Santas and either came late or gave up and went home. All those folks in Santa suits thought the run was a great way to celebrate Christmas but the churches weren't even on their radar. Disconnect, for sure. My friends, we believers are marginalized.

It used to be simple. Everyone went to church. Those few who didn't were the marginalized. Sunday mornings were quiet. The loudest noise was the sound of church bells. There were no hockey, basketball or swim meets until Sunday afternoon. One did not think about belief, one simply went to the same church that parents and grandparents had attended. Those days are over but religion is not, no matter what they say. Each Sunday I come into this sanctuary, look around and see all of you who have come to begin your week with worship and I am humbled. I love worship but, lets face it, I have to be here. You don't. Yet you come week after week. You come despite the weather. You come bringing your children or you come bringing your aches and pains. You come because religion is relevant to you and you work to keep it so, because Belief cannot be left to stagnate.

You understand how critically important Belief is and yet how fragile. It is like the seed that is planted in the ground. With care and weeding and watering, the seed grows into a beautiful flower. Without that care, the seed shrivels and dies. A strong Belief does not come from neglect but from the willing acquiescence that allows growth.

This sustaining work is what Isaiah describes in poetic language: *“but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.”*

How do we allow Belief the freedom to grow? We must each find our own answer to that question but it does involve the courage to question and to doubt. I, and many others here, grew into adulthood with an absolute acceptance that everything bad that ever happened was the will of God. A relative dies tragically. It is the will of God. A monstrous Tsunami kills thousands. It is the will of God. It took years of reading and reflection for me to alter my belief about God's managerial skills. I came to believe in a loving God who does not cause tragedy but rather grieves with those who mourn; blesses the anger at the loss, knowing that in that anger is raw truth and provides strength, comfort and love to all affected. The work of Belief is to question and to doubt.

Belief can be starkly black and white, consisting in a series of 'Thou shalt' and 'thou shalt not.' This rigorous form of Belief does little for the life of the soul; rather, it stifles those liberating questions and holds no life giving soul nourishment. The work of Belief is to be to learn and to grow.

Belief is as strong as the love that enhances and nourishes it. How do we love the One who is at the center of our being yet beyond our understanding? As children we begin to appreciate the reality of God in a profoundly simple way. With the absolute confidence of childhood, we said each night, "God bless mommy and daddy, and pets and toys and all that is important in our world of childhood." We knew God intimately and loved God without question. God was the calming presence as we lay us down to sleep. And each night, we trusted that ineffable presence into sleep. And now, somewhere deep inside us, hidden beneath the sophistication of adulthood, that trusting innocence still exists. Our work is to uncover that unfettered belief, dust it off and reclaim our inheritance. Easier said than done, isn't it.

On Sunday mornings I have about a 5 minute drive to the Church. During that time I listen to *On Being*, an insightful interview program. Host, Krista Tippet talks to people from all walks of life, asking them questions about things of the Spirit. Recently, Rosanne Cash was interviewed by Krista. Rosanne spoke of her childhood religious experience. It was dogmatic and, she felt, punitive. While a teenager, she stopped going to church and as she matured and developed her gift of music, she found her own sense of the Divine. Art and music were her keys to unlocking the door to belief for her.

Another interview was with John O'Donahue, an Irish poet and theologian who shared his Celtic understanding of human/divine relationship. The Divine is visible in the miracle of life; of creation. He suggests that our kinship with all of creation places us at the heart of the Mystery of God. To be aware of the everyday miracles of creation is to believe. To use all of our senses in quest of that Mystery draws us into belief. He writes in his book, *Anam Cara*: "Your senses link you intimately with the divine within you and around you. Attunement to the senses can limber up the stiffened belief and gentle the hardened outlook. It can warm and heal the atrophied feelings that are the barriers exiling us from ourselves and separating us from each other." The work of belief is to open our whole beings to the divine that is within and around us and use all of our senses that we may fill our souls with God even as we begin to understand that we are part of the miracle of creation.

The work of Belief is a lifelong process of drawing closer to the Mystery that is God. It is a lifelong process of living our belief through all that we do. It is a lifelong process of becoming transparent so that what is precious within is reflected in our relationship with all of God's creation. The work of Belief is an ongoing affirmation that

God Is and we are all God's. The work of Belief is to know that we can run and not grow weary and rise up in our hearts on eagle's wings with God leading the way. Amen.