

February 5, 2012
5th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Isa. 40:21-31; Mark 1:29-39

THEOLOGICAL AMNESIA

Some years ago, I was on the Board of the local chapter of the Red Cross. If you've ever had the honor and privilege to serve on a Board of an organization like this, you know that your main job is fundraising. It is a constant struggle, especially in a town like Tallahassee where the largest employers are public entities and every charitable organization is competing for the limited private donors. Anyway, the Red Cross had two major fundraising events (and a whole slew of not so major fund raisers) every year. One was a golf tournament and one was a gala event with dinner, entertainment, silent auction. I always worked on the gala and for a couple of years I had the prestigious position of chair of the event.

It was one big pain in the neck. The first challenge is finding a suitable location. There are very few places in Tallahassee large enough to hold 300 people for food, drinks, dancing and silent auction and so on and those venues that are available are usually expensive to rent. One year Colin Phipps agreed to let us use the riding arena at his stable on Meridian Road across from Maclay High School. This was very generous of him and a great inconvenience to the employees, not to mention the horses who got put out of their stalls into the pasture for the evening. We were very grateful but putting on an upscale event in what is basically a gigantic pole barn presented its own set of problems.

We decided to call the event "Gems and Jeans," this way the ladies could dress up in their best jewelry and flashiest outfits and the guys could wear jeans and casual sport shirts. That was good.

There were lots of logistical challenges, but we got it all figured out – and let me tell you it takes the better part of a year to plan one of these things. The arena

was open air, but we scheduled it for late April and we rented 2 dozen huge fans and it would have been fine except that the forecast for the night of the event was rain.

The day of the event, there were about ten of us working on setting up and decorating. I had become friends with one of the volunteers who was helping with the event. She was one of those people who is always cheerful and easy to be around even when tempers were on edge, and she was a wear-it-on-her-sleeve Christian. As we spent the day of the event watching the clouds gathering and getting up dates on the weather forecast, (this was before people had weather channel apps on their phones), and wondering if we should try to figure out some kind of alternative plan—but there was no alternative—she just kept saying “it is not going to rain. I have prayed about it and God has laid it on my heart that it is not going to rain.” And she would go about her work decorating the pole barn with beautiful strands of crepe paper.

She was so confident, I almost started to believe it too. I knew she was a woman of strong faith and a real “prayer warrior” as they say. I have heard enough miracle stories to know that they do happen. So, the event started at 7:00 PM. At 6:45, the heavens started pouring down in buckets, and the wind was blowing and the men were dropping the ladies off under the overhang and they were stepping out in the sparkly strappy high heel sandals into pools of muddy water.

I was a little worried about my friend. I mean, what is your response when you’ve been walking around all day evangelizing about how God is good all the time, and God has given you peace to know that it is not going to ruin your event which is for such a worthy cause. And then God does just that.

It didn’t faze her one bit. She was just as perky and cheerful as ever. She didn’t try to explain how everything happens for a reason. She certainly did not suffer any crisis of faith. She just moved on. We actually had a great turn out and

most people had a great time. There were more complaints about the difficulty in trying to walk across a floor of 4 inch thick freshly laid sawdust in high heels than there were about having to deal with the rain.

I was wondering if my friend's faith might have been shattered when it rained in spite of her vocal confidence that God would not let it rain that night. But I don't know why really. If it had not rained, it would have indeed been a miracle given all the climatological conditions of the day. But would we all have admitted it. Do you think if there were any among us who did not have faith, they would have had an instant conversion experience because my friend's prediction of a miracle came true? I doubt it. We all would have just smiled indulgently and enjoyed the evening, with little more thought to God than a half-hearted "well thank you Jesus." Since a miracle would not have been a transforming event in my faith life, I don't know why I thought the absence of one would shake the faith of a believer.

It does seem like it works that way though doesn't it. William J. Carl, President of Pittsburg Theological Seminary calls it theological amnesia. We have selective amnesia when it comes to God. In a crisis, we fall apart. When a tragedy takes the life of someone we love, there is a tendency to say: "where is God in all this?" Or: "why did God let this happen to me?" That is understandable response, and God can deal with it.

But theological amnesia becomes epidemic when life goes well. When everything is on track in life, we not only forget to thank God, we forget that God wants what is best for us, and that is not necessarily the same thing as smooth sailing or the culture's notion of success.

The problem, says Carl, is that we don't remember who we are as Christians. We don't remember what we believe or why we believe it.

For centuries, Christians read the miracle stories in the Bible and believed them. Then came the Age of Enlightenment, beginning in the 18th century when scientific discoveries started explaining what previously had been unexplainable. And people started questioning. Did it really happen? And thus began what we now refer to as the debate between science and religion. But that debate is what we used to call in the legal profession a red herring. It is a non-issue that distracts from the real issue.

Those who want to get bogged down in whether the miracles performed by Jesus really happened are suffering from theological amnesia. But more to the point, those Christians who think they have to fight with scientists about the origins of the universe have theological amnesia.

When Isaiah sang the song of the God who sits above the circle of the earth, he was singing for a people, once a great nation, now captive in Babylon. They were a people collectively suffering from theological amnesia. In their depression and sorrow for a way of life that was gone forever, they thought God had abandoned them. They forgot the greatness of God and the goodness of God. They forgot that God promised to be their God forever. And so Isaiah reminds them:

Isaiah 40:21-22 ²¹ Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? ²² It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers;

The issue is not whether miracles happen or used to happen and don't any more. The issue is not whether God created the world in seven days or seven billion years. The issue is whether we remember that God is our Creator, Sustainer, Redeemer and Friend. God is all of those things. He **brings the princes to naught. ...he is great in strength, mighty in power, ... his understanding is unsearchable.**

His understanding is unsearchable Isaiah says. God is the almighty. We cannot begin to understand what God understands.

Do you worry about your credit card debt? Do you worry because you can't pay your bills and you don't even have a credit card to run up? Are you stressed out because your working as hard as you can, trying to provide for those who are dependent on you? Are you worried because you know that you will not live forever and the end that once seemed so distant is now looming? Are you worried about cancer or Alzheimer's disease?

Remember your God, Isaiah says. Maybe you have forgotten God, Isaiah says, but God has not forgotten you. Trust God and your worry problems will be cured. Not: "Trust God and all your problems will be solved." Not: "Trust God and he won't let it rain on your fund raiser." But the worry, the anxiety, the fear of the unknown. Those will be cured.

²⁸ Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; ... He gives power to the faint, and strengthens the powerless. ³⁰ [and] ³¹ 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.