

A God Who Hides

A long, long, LONG time ago (we might even say “Once upon a time”), God “tore open the heavens ... came down,” and acted on behalf of his people. You know the story. First, God appeared to Moses in a burning bush at the top of Mount Sinai, and told him to go back to Egypt. Then, one plague at a time, God undid Pharaoh’s dictatorial rule, and delivered God’s people from slavery. Capping everything off by leading them back to a quaking, smoking Mount Sinai, and giving them the Torah. Awesome deed, God!

As God’s people, we love to tell that story. Still. It’s paradigmatic. It forever defined our God as one who liberates, saves, one who loves her people and hears their cries.

But like I said, that was a long, long, LONG time ago. What about now? Does God even do awesome deeds anymore? Has God gone away? Is God dead? Or, maybe, asleep? Perhaps God simply needs to be awakened. And then, reminded of his responsibility.

About 2500 years ago, the prophet Isaiah thought it was time to remind God by re-telling that story. By that time it was already an old, paradigmatic story for Isaiah and his people. Once again they were in a state of despair. As we heard, their beautiful, holy temple had been burned to the ground. Their beloved city, Jerusalem, had become a desolation. And they were wondering: where is God? Asleep? Dead? So Isaiah told them: God was hiding.

Hiding?! Is this the kind of God we want? Our world is a mess. Our lives are full of sin. And God is hiding.

The month of November is now past, December is upon us, and Isaiah’s descriptive language fits like a glove. “We all fade like a leaf,” Isaiah laments. “Our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.” Can you feel that cold wind? Do you see all the leaves being blown out there? Across the yard, down the street, into oblivion?

Isaiah doesn’t name those iniquities. Presumably, the people know. Idolatry. That’s an easy one to fall into, a constant temptation. Oh, the things we worship in place of God! Shall we start naming them? Starting with Christmas consumerism. Blinding busyness. We can each add our own to the list.

And then there’s injustice. The rift between the rich and the poor just keeps getting wider. It seems like every time I take out the car to run an errand I come to at least one intersection where someone is standing, holding a sign: “Hungry. Please help.” And every time, I turn away. Drive right on by. Why should I help them? It’s God’s fault. He’s hiding, remember? If she would just tear open the heavens, and show up once in a while. Or, at all. But instead, God hides. Century after century after century.

But what if we have the wrong idea about how God works? What if the paradigmatic story was just to get things started? A way to introduce us to God, to God’s way and will in the world. But then, from that story on, God works much more slowly and subtly. Through us, even. Which clearly would take a lot of patience, a lot of starts and stops and start-agains. And meanwhile, it’s like God is hiding in the background. Watching. Waiting. And yes, working.

This past Wednesday evening we had a remarkable meal downstairs in the fellowship hall. Close to 60 people attended. About half were from Lorraine, and the other half from the Greater Faith Christian Church. Half, in other words, were white, and half were black. Several attendees from both congregations brought dishes they had prepared, using recipes that will be combined into a single cookbook. We ate. We laughed. After the meal, a group of four youth from Greater Faith asked me to show them around the church. I started with the secret stairway, which comes up here to the sanctuary.

Of course, God wasn't there on Wednesday. Or was she?

In the midst of his people's suffering and disillusionment and despair, and the apparent absence of even a paradigmatic God, Isaiah invokes (in verse 8) a sacred Truth: "O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand." God's people, throughout our history and right up to today, to us, have a claim on God. And God has a claim on us. God is our source, our Creator, our heavenly Father and Mother. We are God's children, God's project, we might say. To us it may seem as if this project has been going on forever, and by now is a failed one. And as if this God is completely gone.

But God isn't gone. He's merely hiding. We might even call it a game of holy hide and seek.

In the meantime, and over the centuries, God has periodically arranged other paradigmatic events, to keep us grounded. One of these was the birth of the Messiah, the coming of Christ into the world. Our scriptures tell us to await yet another. "Tear open the heavens," we cry out again. "O come, O come, Immanuel." Come, God with us.

Amen.