

A DIVINE LINE IN THE SAND

Texts on Sunday, October 18, 2015

Job 38: 1-11

Mark 10: 35-45

When people say they don't believe in God, mostly they mean that there's no sign of a being up there deciding just how things will go, watching our every move, working out how to punish us for the bad things we do and bless us for the good. I don't believe in that sort of god either, and I hope you don't. Freud was right: that god is a giant movie screen projection of our fondest wishes and worst fears—that the Big One has it all in control, and will slap us on the head before things get too awful and will give us the good things we want—just like we feared or wished our mom would when we were two. That god is too small.

Now, there are advantages to believing in that sort of god, which a lot of people do. If God is planning or preventing every little thing, then you are not responsible. Then you don't need to grow up. Then you can let things slide pretty bad, because you just know that somehow God and Jesus are going to pull your number when they roll those lottery balls. No wonder lots of people don't believe in God. All they hear of God comes from T.V. preachers blowing about this god of superstition, magic, and childish wishes.

Still, people who believe in that sort of god need a break, for the Bible often portrays God exactly like the Big Guy Up There who has it all under control, punishing and blessing according to his rules. If the Bible says it, and preachers preach it, it's no surprise that people think it. Think of Job in Chapter 38 standing at last before the Holy One. Does not God say that he built the whole world and separated the dry land from the seas declaring "Here shall your proud waves be stopped"? In Psalm 104, the psalmist praises God for his power to command natural disasters to carry his word. "You make the winds your messengers, fire and flame your ministers." The psalmist joyfully joins with God's speech to Job, singing that "you set a boundary that the waters may not pass, that they might never again cover the earth."

Why, if we set out to read every Bible verse wherein God is said to plan and perform all things great and small, a month of Sundays would not do. Yet something has happened in history which has changed how we read the Bible. A lot of people refuse to hear this. They so want to pretend that the Bible is unchanging that they put their heads in the sand in order to keep believing that God made a line in the sand to stop the seas. But through hundreds of years since the Bible was written, human understanding has been increasing. Understanding is the gift of God, after all, who creates us in the

divine image. Through the gift of understanding, we have learned how the earth was formed as a big boiling stone thrown off from the star we call the sun. We know why the winds move. We see the terrifying fires in California and the horrible hurricanes, and we understand that the forces that cause these calamities having nothing to do with messages from an angry God.

And we also see that the seas are rising. Three weeks ago, as the U.N. General Assembly met here in New York, I was invited by Rev. Cornell Edmonds of our fellow Presbyterian Church of the Covenant to join in worship there in the shadow of the U.N. building. Among the guests was the President of Nauru, Baron Waqa, and his family. Nauru, a tiny island hundreds of miles northeast of Australia, is the world's smallest independent republic—about one fourth the size of Manhattan. Almost all its 10,000 citizens live at the edge of the flat land. There the seas are rising. No divine command keeps them back. Global warming is slowly drowning Nauru.

In ancient times, people believed that God marked a line in the sand, “and told the sea its surging tides and waves were free to travel up the sloping strand but not to overtake the land.” But with science, we understand what the psalmist could not. In some ways, we are growing up. We understand that God never set a boundary for the sea. What *has* happened is that humans have ignored the boundaries on their own desires, which are now overwhelming the earth’s ecosystems. Like giddy children tearing open toys beneath the Christmas tree, we—meaning the wealthiest in the western nations—have ripped open every package of coal and oil we could find, careless of the consequences, or that it took Mother Nature billions of years to wrap those packages and bury them deep in the bowels of the earth.

You could say that we didn’t know what we were doing—*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do*—but now we do know. And still we’re doing it. In just one hundred years, our fabulous fossil fuels have altered the whole earth. Some scoff at this. They say there are no limits to growth, and no divine lines drawn in the sands of desire. But climate change is real. It is on the news every night, never mind whether the newscasters dare call it that. Those who wrote the Bible could never have imagined the towering industrial engine we have built, so powerful that it can force a fierce future on all creatures great and small. But the Bible writers did understand what woes unlimited desires can wreak. What else is the story of the Tower of Babel, if not a warning that a divine line is set against unlimited desire?

So where are we? If God is not as we thought when we were a child—*when I was child I spoke like a child and reasoned like a child, but now that I am grown, I put away childish things*—; if that god has died for us because we are now grown, as the apostle promised, who is God now? Who is God for grown-ups—once we are not just little children hoping to be saved?

In the story we read from the gospel of Mark, two disciples ask the Master to “do for us whatever we ask of you.” Wow! Here it is again: unlimited desire in immature souls: *Please Jesus, please God, do whatever we ask. Pretty please.* According to the tradition, the disciples James and John will grow into great souls and accept great responsibility, but at this stage, they still speak like a child and think like a child. What! Is there no divine line in the sand, no limit to the cravings of the human mind? Why not ask leave of Jesus to dig up all the fossil fuels the world over and become rich beyond imagining like the CEO of ExxonMobil, who when asked his philosophy of life, paused, thought, said: “My philosophy is to make money!”

But these disciples have an even bigger craving. *Please make us the most important beings in glory forever and ever (after yourself and God, of course),* they ask. Their lust for importance reaches a height so absurd that it sounds like a parable. Not the “kingdom of heaven” is like . . . but the kingdom of hell is like two men who asked their master to share in his glory. Their yearning reveals that crack in the bell of our beautiful human nature which drives us to try to lay hold of more and more of the one thing we think will make us happy. This craving in the disciples is the same craving that drives the rulers of big business and government to deny that burning coal and oil is covering the earth with drought and flood, crashing storms and mud slides, and wars erupting everywhere like sores all over the body of Job. The craving in the disciples is the same crack and the same craving that you know in yourself, your own particular drive to lay hold of more and more of that one thing that seems out of reach, though your reaching for it has caused others a lot of grief. You know what that is. No one lives a whole life undisturbed by the hunger to fill their unhappiness with one big gulp of that one thing.

But Jesus will not leave his disciples in their sin. He does not cut them down for their unwholesome craving. He is for healing. First he asks whether they can suffer—drink the cup, undergo the baptism of fire. With their immaturity still pushing like peach fuzz from a boy’s face, they assure Jesus that yes, they can go and stand their trial. Indeed they will, Jesus allows, even if they don’t yet know what that will mean. But then he says that to share in his glory is not a future he designs or controls. Here we see what a grown-up relation with God looks like. Spiritually mature people know that they know nothing at all of what is to come. They cannot imagine it—and do not try, just as Jesus does not try to imagine it. Grown-ups in God also are learning how to let go their anxiety about the unknown future. They are learning to trust God. This is not at all like believing that God will do this or do that for you or your loved ones. No, Jesus is revealing what full contact with the presence of God feels like. *The future is for those for whom it is prepared,* he says. *Let not your hearts be troubled; neither let them be afraid.*

Yet the teaching is not complete, for Jesus is not counseling extreme passivity. Why, if the poor and weak in the world just passively accepted whatever rulers do, then the rulers will without question drive the whole world into the sea in their pursuit of more and more. But Jesus has a different teaching, which he offers to all his disciples to calm their fight for importance. He draws a divine line in the sand. It is not set at the ocean's edge. Nor is it a theory about the power of God to punish or bless. The divine line is drawn across those cravings we cannot get under control by ourselves.

Jesus says, "You know that among the nations, those whom they recognize as rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you. Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant; whoever wishes to be first must become the slave of all." Until the end of time, it seems, rulers will come and go and try to get their way with money and power, with armored cars and machine guns in the streets, living in trillion dollar towers, terrorizing the poor, selling liquor and lottery tickets to people craving release from their griefs. We see this right here in the land of the free: those we recognize as our rulers lord it over us. The big men are tyrants, mostly. The world goes 'round and 'round like this because for most people, constant craving is all there is.

But it is not so with you, says Jesus. You are a disciple. You are no longer a child; you have given up childish things. In the words from our hymn today, you see that "we are not free when we're confined / to every wish that sweeps the mind / but free when freely we accept / the sacred bounds that must be kept"—the divine line. You are free when you feel the divine line drawn in your soul, that line beyond which the powers of cravings fall away and your integrity, your coherence—not yours, but Christ's in you—stands up full and strong, and you are ready to step down to become servant of all. To take up your cross. To become servant even of all the parts of yourself, nourishing each, but letting none have sway over you, which is your freedom in Christ. This is what God is for grown-ups: real inner freedom from misery.

Our nation is full of constant craving, of rulers constantly ignoring the divine limits to their endless desires. If there will come a change of heart and a change of course to divert our world from disaster, it will come from spiritually mature men and women, disciples like yourselves, who have learned, at home, at work, and in all our public affairs, to grow up and discern the divine line in the soul, and ask God's help to cross it over without craving, knowing nothing of the future, ready to step down and become servant of all.