

WPC
Rev. Ken Sunoo
January 9, 2011

Bruised Reeds and Dimly Burning Wicks
Isaiah 42:1-10; Matthew 3:13-17

If we're being honest, how many of us feel that we would do things differently if we were God? Woody Allen ends one of his movies by having a character say something like, "I don't hate God. I think the worst thing that can be said about God is that God is an underachiever."¹ So often, God doesn't seem to measure up to our expectations for how God ought to act. In other words, if we were God, if we had God's power, things would be different. We would be another kind of God; we would be God in a different way than the God we often find in the Bible. [SHOW CLIP FROM BRUCE ALMIGHTY]

A number of years ago a wonderful book came out titled *Children's Letters to God*. One of the letters was from a little girl named Norma, who wrote:

Dear God, did you mean for giraffes to look that way, or was that an accident?

¹ As quoted by William Willimon, Pulpit Resource, 1-9-11, p. 10.

The point being that if Norma was God she would not have made giraffes that way. As Isaiah notes, God's thoughts are not our thoughts, nor are our ways God's ways (Is. 55:8).

Or again, take the resurrection – the greatest miracle ever. “When God raised Jesus from the dead, when Jesus stepped out of the tomb and shook off the powers of sin and death, the risen Jesus appeared only to the faithful, only to his little group, only to people who already believed in him.”² As one commentator said, “That’s no way to run a resurrection. What he should have done was to appear to the Sanhedrin and say, ‘Would you like to go another round?’” But no, the risen Christ appears only to a few women followers and to a few frightened disciples. How many of us would have done it that way? God's thoughts are not our thoughts, and God's ways are not our ways.

So, many of us have a quarrel with the things God does and the way he does them. One of the huge arguments put forth by atheists is that, if there really is a God, why is there so much suffering? Why won't God live up to our expectations and end all suffering? Why won't God just act like God?

² Tom Long, Princeton Seminary Bulletin, Vol. XVII, Number 2, 1996, p. 197.

Our scripture lesson from Isaiah tells us that God will send a chosen “servant” who will come and do something about the problem Israel faced. God at last will intervene in a decisive way to establish justice in the earth. And yet, what will God’s servant be like? He’ll be so gentle that he won’t “quench a dimly burning wick” and he won’t break a “bruised reed.” The servant will work in a way that is delicate and nonviolent, so gentle that he won’t extinguish a flickering candle flame or damage a thin blade of grass.

As Christians, we believe this passage from Isaiah refers to Jesus. In fact, the passage from Matthew’s Gospel that we read this morning states that after Jesus is baptized by John, a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” The word “Beloved” is similar in meaning to the word “chosen” found in Isa. 42, where God states, “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights.”

So Jesus is God’s servant who was lowly and humble. Now what does that tell you about God and the way God works? The baptism of Jesus is like Jesus’ inauguration. And how does Jesus launch his ministry? He kneels before John in the muddy Jordan River water and is baptized. “It’s not much of an inauguration day for the Jesus administration. It’s so modest

a beginning that we are apt to ask, ‘This is it? This is how the kingdom of God gets rolling?’”³

And if God was going to establish justice on earth through Jesus his servant, why is it taking so long? Why doesn’t God send fire down from heaven and do it now? God’s ways are not our ways, and God’s thoughts are not our thoughts. We want a fix-it-now God, but as Isaiah reminds us, God comes not as a military conqueror but as a “gentle gardener and a lamp lighter.”⁴ “A bruised reed...he will not break. A dimly burning wick...he will not extinguish.”

Why is God this way? I don’t know. God’s thoughts are certainly not my thoughts, and God’s ways are not my ways. But Tom Long reminds us that “when we call down God’s justice on the world, we usually assume that it is justice for us and punishment for others. But the truth of the matter is, we too – all of us – are bruised reeds and dimly burning wicks, and God, as an act of patient mercy, chooses not to rain down wrath because it would fall upon all of us.”⁵

Instead, God comes into the world as a vulnerable baby, a baby who didn’t grow up to be a military hero but one who on the cross took upon himself the wrath that belongs to us all. That’s who God is. God is not

³ Willimon, p. 10.

⁴ Long, p. 200.

⁵ Long, p. 200-1.

someone like the President, only a million times more powerful. God is like Jesus – the suffering servant who doesn't quench a dimly burning wick or break a bruised reed.

There are over 2 million people incarcerated in the United States. William Willimon tells the story of a group of older women who gather once a week and bake a huge batch of chocolate chip cookies and then take turns delivering these to the local prison. The sources of crime and the reasons for why people go to jail are complex. It's a huge problem which, if it's ever solved, will not be solved by a couple of older women showing up at the jail with a few chocolate chip cookies.

And yet the warden of the prison said that those cookies are transforming that prison one person at a time, one prisoner at a time, receiving a gift for the first time in his life, an undeserved, intimate, tangible act of love.

Perhaps those servants, baking those cookies, know more about the way the world really is, and the direction in which the world is really headed, than the powerful people who build and manage those prisons.⁶

⁶ Willimon, p. 12.

God's thoughts are not our thoughts; God's ways are not our ways.
Thank God for that. For a bruised reed God will not break, and a dimly
burning wick God will not extinguish. Praise be to God. Amen.