

3 Lent, Year C
March 7, 2010
Saint Ann's, Old Lyme

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

There is a canticle in the Morning Prayer service, which urges us to: 'seek the Lord while he wills to be found'. And the question that very often pops into my mind is this: how do we know when 'God wills to be found'? And I suspect I'm not alone in asking that question. I also suspect that I'm not alone as I yearn for some sign from God that God does indeed 'will to be found'. And as I yearn for some sign, I am often reminded of a story entitled 'Message in the Stars' by one of my favorite contemporary writers, a fellow named Frederick Buechner.

In that piece, Buechner wonders what would happen if God's existence were demonstrated in some dramatic and irrefutable way. "Suppose for instance," and I'm quoting him here, "God were to take the ... Milky Way and brighten it up a little and then rearrange it so that all of a sudden one night the world would step outside and look up at the heavens and see not the usual haphazard scattering of stars but, written out in letters light years tall, the sentence: I REALLY EXIST or GOD IS".

Doesn't that sound like this morning's reading, from Exodus? When asked for some sign that it was God who sent him to rescue the Israelites, God replied (in capital letters, no less) 'I AM WHO I AM'.

If something like that happened to us, not only would our urge for some sort of sign be satisfied - and then some! - but it would certainly help us as we try to tell the world not only that God exists, but also that God loves us. The problem is, that when we do yearn for some sort of 'sign' we are, in fact, putting God to the test. And that flies right in the face of what Paul urges in today's Epistle reading from the first letter to the Corinthians: "we must not put Christ to the test".

Buechner goes on to suggest that while the initial impact of such a display would be really wild, he also suggests that after a while, we would settle back in to the many ways we put God to the test, day in and day out.

Because, as Buechner writes so wisely, “what we need to know is not just that God exists, ... but that there is a God right here in the thick of our day-to-day lives who may not be writing messages in the stars, but who in one way or another is trying to get messages [to us] ... as we move around ... knee-deep in the fragrant muck and misery and marvel of the world.”

The fact is, we do put God to the test, all the time. Fortunately, Paul also assures us that God will not let us be tested beyond our strength. But God does indeed test us, and in those times of testing, God is also calling us to act. God wants us to do things.

Now the 'thing' God wants me to do and the 'thing' God wants you to do may be very different; In fact they most likely are different. It was all I could do to pass any math or science course I ever took, so I don't expect that God wants me to be either a brain surgeon or some high-ranking executive at Microsoft. Also, what God might want any one of us to do might change from one season to the next.

Now, for example, God has called Saint Ann's Church in Old Lyme, Connecticut into a season of transition, and asks Saint Ann's both to understand and claim this particular time as an opportunity – an opportunity to discern how God might want Saint Ann's to be - in the next chapter of its life as the Body of Christ in Old Lyme, Connecticut.

God wants us to do something. God has expectations of us – individually and collectively - just as God expected something of the fig tree that we heard about in the Gospel reading. God expects us to be productive, in some way or another, and there are consequences if we're not productive. But the reason God wants us to do something and be productive isn't to lay heavy burdens on us. Instead, God breaks into the human world in order to upset what is oppressive and uphold what is loving and liberating, In the very midst of the ordinary muck and misery and marvel of life, God fills the world with signs – signs that God isn't aloof, signs that God cares and cares deeply.

Sometimes we too have the eyes of faith, but sometimes our eyes are dim and cloudy. But even when our eyes are dim and cloudy, God is prepared to offer us signs – again and again and again. Of course we would prefer undeniable, irrefutable proof – like stars in the sky that spell things (preferably in English and in capital letters) or bolts of lightning, or messages on billboards. But mostly God talks to us in much more everyday ways – in the midst of our everyday lives, and in our everyday places.

And God also speaks, not just to us, but through us – through the likes of Saint Paul – and through you and me – so that we can be productive – in God's name – as signs of reassurance for the world around us.

Ultimately, of course, God spoke through the Gardener, the One who rescued that fig tree from a well-deserved death, and lived and died and rose in order to rescue us, too. Jesus the Gardener never suggested that we shouldn't ask for signs – and perhaps that is –in a way - putting God to the test. What he suggested instead is that when God puts us to the test, that we try our very best to bear fruit and be productive.

And when our first efforts aren't very productive – as is often the case – the ever-patient Gardener strengthens us to try again. And what usually happens is that when we are trying to be faithful and productive, the signs of God's presence become more apparent to us.

And the Gardener – Jesus – confirmed on a tree at Calvary, that what God can do through out weakness surpasses anything we might do through our strength. Jesus died so that even though we do put God to the test – all the time – and even though our best efforts aren't good enough, in Christ, our efforts are made good enough.

May we have the eyes of faith to see the signs, and may we be productive as God's signs in and for the world, and may the Gardener always be our strength. Amen.

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