

Sermon for January 29, 2012

Scripture: Deuteronomy 18:15-20

“God’s Will” Rev. Christopher Fazel

Carrie Newcomer – remember that name, for she is a significant voice in today’s relevant music scene. And here is a verse from her song titled, “I Heard an Owl.”

I heard an owl call last night  
homeless and confused  
and I stood naked and bewildered  
at the evil people do

and up upon the hill there  
is a terrible sign  
that tells the story of what darkness waits  
if we leave the light behind.

so don’t tell me hate is ever  
right or god’s will  
these are the wheels we put  
in motion ourselves  
and the whole world weeps  
and is weeping still  
though shaken I still believe  
the best of what we all can be  
and the only peace this world will know  
can only come from love.

Great stuff: and yet, this song and our scripture today raise a difficult but important question. And that is: "How are we to know the will of God?" You know, one of the most tempting human responses to tragedy is, "It was God's will." I saw a cartoon strip awhile ago that depicted an angel reporting to God about how things are going on earth, and the angel said, "They divide everything that happens into two categories -- things that insurance companies pay for and things that they blame on you." (Acts of God!)

Of course, it's tempting when surveying this aching world of ours, to write off any belief in a good and powerful God who is conscious of us and seeks our good, as merely wishful thinking. Or as they say, "If God is good and God is great, then why is this world in such a horrible mess?" Now, that is a very fair question and one with which the Bible wrestles often in its pages.

And yet, we must admit that our scripture is consistent from cover to cover in affirming a supreme power that is aware of the human condition, cares about human suffering, and (as it says in our statement of faith) "seeks in holy love to save us..." Or as every participant in the 12-Step Program knows, the first principle is, "My life is out of control, and my only chance to bring order out of this chaos is to rely on a higher power, and to give that power authority in my life." That is

also, of course, a primary principle in at least three of the world's religions -- Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. And yet, faith in such a God continues to be a challenge for most of us.

Furthermore, even if we choose to believe in a God who knows us personally, and seeks to guide us through the decisions of life, we are challenged with this question, "How are we to know the guidance of God -- God's will for us?"

Well, that quest for knowing the will of God, or the gods is as old as human consciousness. The Greeks had a place called Delphi, where a prophetess would enter into trance and offer the guidance of Apollo, on any subject from domestic relations to the affairs of state. The Magi followed the paths of the stars and planets for guidance, and the Babylonians examined the entrails of slaughtered animals -- all in the quest for discerning the divine mind and will.

The Hebrews raised up prophets, -- those that knew from within, the will of God, which is the subject of our reading in Deuteronomy today. The big question concerning prophets, for the Israelites was, "How do you know if a prophet is a true prophet?" Right after our reading today, the following evaluation system was offered, "If the prophecy comes true, then the prophet was speaking the truth. If not, the prophet wasn't. Well, that may be helpful in hindsight, but it hardly helps at the point of decision, which is when you really need to know God's will. And Israel struggled with this problem throughout the period of the prophets, and we struggle with it yet today.

However, with the advent of Christianity, the prophet tradition underwent a kind of democratic transformation. No longer would the people of God seek guidance from a priest or prophet, but rather, through the individual indwelling of the living Christ. And yet, the problem remains, because as we all know, our inner voices are as many and as varied as those we encounter day to day. How are we to discern the voice of the Christ, among all the competing whispers within our own mind and heart?

Well, here is one suggestion for a three-fold process of entering into a closer walk with the living Christ, so that we may discern the will of God for ourselves. First, we need to study regularly the character of Jesus of Nazareth as he is portrayed through the pages of scripture. Jesus is our role model, and we get to know him quite well as we study the gospels. The main principles are all there -- patience, mercy, forgiveness, kindness, encouragement, compassion. These are the essentials of God's will for us as revealed through the authority of Jesus Christ. Second, we need to lean on one another as we strive to live the life of Christ in our various relationships -- learning through trial and error and forgiveness and trying again.

Finally, and most important, we all need to persevere in prayer, cultivating the awareness of Christ as our constant companion -- walking with us through all the ambiguities of human existence -- patient with our shortcomings, but persistent in leading us into the ways of life.

Sharon and I had a very close friend who struggled with and eventually died from a most virulent form of cancer. One day she said to us concerning her experiences, "A lot of it's awful. But there's beauty too." She said, "I have certainly developed a more intimate relationship with my Creator." She said, "Healing comes in different forms, but there are common denominators. And the chief one is God." Now, she didn't know what the future would bring, and she struggled to discern the whys and wherefores of her illness. But one thing was clear for her. A closer walk brings with it healing and peace. May it be so with you and me. Let us pray.