

Year A, 19<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 23)  
October 11, 2020  
The Reverend Dr. Brent Was

“And the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.”

I was going to open with “I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are,” but after this week I thought we needed a gentler start to things.

Goodness gracious... Another week. I really hope our nation can take all of this chaos. Where is God in all of this? Our world? Our situation? Your life? Where is God? I hear this question often because you know, holiness can be hard to see right now. God is not visible. Discernable, yes; knowable, recognizable, absolutely; but not visible. (Or audible, we can't touch or taste or smell God, the point being that God is unknowable in the way we know most things). And that's hard for us. We are material beings, concrete in our relationship to the world, and yet we understand God to be immaterial, beyond material, abstract, more *becoming* than *being*. To try to imagine such a God is like describing a color you have never seen, or a flavor you have never tasted. As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be... We get past, present and future, but all at once? Or the Trinity, three persons, one substance... what does that mean? It makes no sense, not from our finite human perspective and that doesn't make it any less true.

Where is God in all of this? What is the first commandment? \_\_\_\_ “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other God's before me.” And the second? \_\_\_\_\_ “You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above or that is on earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.” Idolatry. These are both about the sin of idolatry, treating as God that which is not God. This is so important (and so common) that it gets twenty percent of the ten commandments!

We have never been good at idolatry. Strike that. We've never been good at following these two commandments; we are *very good* at idolatry. Why? Well, we need authority in our lives. We need something larger than ourselves, something to orient on, get our bearing from, a foundation from which to begin. But when we have an intangible foundation, God, an invisible compass rose, a pole star when it is daylight... How does the hymn go? “Immortal, Invisible, God only wise/In light inaccessible hid from our eyes.” How do you follow what you cannot sense? How can you remember the invisible when there is so much of everything right in front of us? If the history of humanity demonstrates anything, for better or too often for worse, humans follow something!

There was a great New Yorker cartoon from years ago. I can't find it online, but I am sure I didn't imagine it. It was in two frames. The first was a man with a sign walking down the street. It read, "I'm a fool for Jesus." The second frame shows him passing, and on the back side it read, "Whose fool are you?" We are going to follow something!

Where is God in all of this? This is what our Exodus reading is about. They had been getting along OK. They needed Moses' intervention a few times, but they were getting along, surviving in extremely difficult conditions. What a pickle they were in! The anxiety of the Hebrew people in the wilderness was reasonable and understandable. But then Moses left for a while. He went up Mt. Sinai, and the people's outward and visible guide was no longer present. That did not work out. Aaron himself cast the Golden Calf. They needed to worship, to follow, and lacking other resources, lacking the right tools, the right spiritual tools, they made something to worship.

Our reading from St. Matthew alludes to this, too. This is an allegorical story about the end times and who is invited to the big finale with God. We won't get into it, but some of the guests made light of the King's (God's) invitation and went away "...one to his farm, another to his business..." They put human things before God, they had different priorities, if they even really understood if God was calling. A wedding invitation from the King? Really, the King? And there is money in an account in Nigeria and my extended warranty is about to expire.

We cannot see God! Not with these eyes, not usually. We cannot hear the still small voice of God. Not with these ears, not usually. And we need to! Here are stories two and three thousand years old, demonstrating how badly it goes for us when we veer off the true God path. God's wrath burning against us, being cast into the outer darkness. We need to see God, to see where God is in all of this.

Why? Why does knowing where God is in all of this matter? Human beings need a god. We need the presence, to be in the presence of that which is beyond our understanding, beyond our ability to comprehend, domesticate or colonize. We need God. We need the presence of God to align us with Truth and Reality, that is, align us with God, the universe and everything. This is what we mean when we ask "Where is God in all of this?"

Why does that matter? Why does knowing where God is or being in alignment with God's will matter? Knowing where God is, where God is present in all of this, is another way of saying we learn how it is *supposed to be*. It is the will of God that makes the river run crooked! When we understand that, then, and only then, can we really know what we are supposed to do in any given moment or season or epoch. Because in the end, this is what is important, what we do, how we

enact God's will in the world, how we make real the Commonwealth of God right here, right now. (Again, just a churchy way of saying doing what is right, doing what we are supposed to do).

To that end, what we believe doesn't really matter, it doesn't, not unless it informs us of, or helps us conform to God's will. It can, orthodoxy, right belief, can be helpful, but it is not required. Similarly, how we pray does not matter. Be it personal private prayers or our gatherings on Sundays, it doesn't matter how you do it, what words you use, if you cross yourself or stand at a specific time or anything (and I say this as a quite conservative liturgist). What matters is that our prayer aligns us to God, or gives us the discipline required to see beyond our self interest, beyond the sin-blinkered field of vision we usually see the world through. (Now it just so happens that one of the very best ways to do this is strict adherence to the rubrics of the Book of Common Prayer. Aren't we fortunate!) It is not *how* you do it, it is that you do it, that you believe or pray in ways that connect you with God, the real God, not just the image of God you find most convenient, least demanding, or easiest to discern, but with God, the Almighty, creator of heaven and earth and all of that.

OK. We need to discern where God is in all of this. Doing this will connect us to Reality. It will help us ground ourselves to the Ground of Being. It will enable right relationship with that very God. That is the goal of all of this, our Christian religion, the practice of worshiping God in Christ with the Holy Spirit that we may fully know God in Christ with the Holy Spirit and know what we are supposed to do, how we are supposed to live, how we are supposed to be.

This brings us to the question of the moment: what are we supposed to do right now? I am talking Blue Hill 2020, COVID-19, lockdown, economic downturn, election strife, winter is coming right now. What are you, individually, we collectively supposed to do right now? A lot of people all over the nation are struggling with that question. Not only figuring out what there is for us to do from here, but what we should be doing, what is God's will for us and our nation in this moment. There are so many unknowns, so many scenarios that could play out, and honestly, some of them are pretty horrifying. Almost 60,000 cases yesterday. We don't need pundits to tell us what to do, or what to expect. We don't need politicians (or priests for that matter) to predict where the world is going and how to respond, it is way beyond that: we need God. We need God's counsel in ways that collectively, we haven't needed for a long time. We've all had our own personal tragedies, sorrow and pain in our own lives, and God in Christ is always there, our holy comforter with a heart that breaks and heals like our own. Now we are in a collective tragedy, one playing out across the globe, and each of us are little widows mites, a thin slice of copper put into God's treasury, infinitesimal on one hand, the most valuable gift every given on the other.

So I have homework for you. Seriously. You've had eight months with me and no homework, so its about time. Now I won't ask for hands, but many of us have active prayer practices and, many of us do not beyond Sunday morning. Sunday worship, the Principal Mass, is our primary practice and if you are with us, Gold Star!!! You are in a great prayer posture already. (In this new age, YouTube viewing counts, too). And this is not enough, not enough to really dig in, to really open a relationship with God; or to really slow things down, make things quiet enough inside to hear that still small voice; or to soften your heart enough to let God's love shine in, seep in. Your homework is to pray this week.

Five minutes a day. (I am a firm believer in baby steps to the kingdom). I ask you to pray five minutes a day this week and see what happens. Five minutes is how long it says to say Compline found of page 127 of your BCP. That is a fine way pray, say it right before you go to bed. Or come to Morning Prayer at 8:45 Wednesday – Saturday on the same Zoom Link we are on now. Read your Bible. Say a rosary (we're allowed to do that). Do centering prayer or meditate in any other way you know how. Go for a walk with intention to pay attention to the ebb and flow of the tides, both in your soul and in the sea. Prayer is about intention. St. Lawrence turned kneading bread and doing dishes into beatification-worthy prayer! Turn off the radio or TV and knit yourself into silence, or work on that project in your shop with intention. Sit with a friend or spouse, in person or on the phone and pray for them aloud or in silence and then they return the favor. Or just have a chat with Jesus. "Dearest Jesus, I've been feeling.." "Jesus, I don't know what to do.." and take it from there. Most of us are quite capable of one sided conversations, eventually He'll probably respond. Start with something, then try to listen to your own heart, for that is often the medium through which God speaks to us, our feelings, our instincts, our innate sense of right and wrong. There is no right or wrong way to pray. Some of us find set forms to be extremely helpful. Others sing themselves to God, or immerse in God's light in paint, clay or pen. Silence is the first language of God. Creativity is a close second. But really, just this week, try praying. Try noticing God, our unseen God right in front of you. Where is God in all of this? Listen. Pray. God is right here. AMEN.