

A Very Personal God

Will Willimon - former chaplain at Duke University - has helped to guide my thinking this week, my response to our Scripture readings - from Isaiah and from John. Willimon writes these words about our faith - about the God we've come to worship this morning.

He writes - Our God has a face, a name - our God is an active personal presence who comes into our lives. Our God, Scripture tells us, and life shows us, wants to love us - and to enlist us to work with God in doing God's will on earth, as it is in heaven.

Our God wants to love us and enlist us... And so - Our God gets personal with us - Isaiah, the prophet, felt God's presence and heard God's call in his life.. *The Holy One of Israel has chosen you...* God loves us *God gives you as a light to the nations....* God enlists us. And in Jesus- John the Baptist and the first disciples felt that presence and heard that call...

And so have we - so have we. Some stirring in our inmost being, some tug or push or pull to keep a window open in our lives to all that is so much larger and greater and beyond all our knowing...

Some sense that - yes - we should be here - here - to listen, to hear, more about who we are, and whose we are, and why it is we are at all. We've heard the call of our God, who - after all - after all we know about our world and about ourselves, still, still seems very much to be a part of it all. Creator of all life and sustainer.

Let's talk about it all... about God. Let us pray

God - you've spoken to us, come to us, in sacred scriptures, and most wonderfully in Jesus Christ.... By the working of your spirit in our lives.. And so - we've come again - through bitter cold - in trust that we will hear you speak to us again - that we will be warmed by your word to us. Open our ears, Lord, and our minds and hearts - to sense your presence, to hear your word, and to more nearly do your will in the world... Amen.

Who knows what it is, all that it is, that brings us here? For one man the old story is that, on one Sunday at least, it was his wife. It seems he was snug as a bug in a rug in bed on a cold winter morning and he said - I'm not going to church today - no way. It's cold, some of the people there don't like me much, half the time not even half the members show up - I'm staying in bed. And with words not too kind his wife said - no - you're not. Because I need to hear God's word this morning, So get up - besides - you're the preacher... She said it - and I'm here.

I'm here because we need to hear God's word But ... Why not alone at the kitchen table, or in our favorite reading corner - Bible in hand, ready to hear? And there - we could hear.

So why be here... ? Because - for all that you and I can read and so hear our God in and thru that inner ear that is God's gift to us..... God's word is heard, most fully true, through the ears of all God's people... Many ears hear a fuller sound - the more profound meaning of God's Word.

Long before we figured it out - how best to hear the sound of the universe - Long before we filled acres and acres of land with listening devices - attuned to each other- to catch the faintest trace of sound from the universe, Long before.....God chose a people to hear God's word - the better that all may know than one alone ever could.

And what is true for the hearing of the sound of the universe, is true for the bearing of God's word into the world. It is the Christmas eve candle lighting reminder - one candle can indeed shatter the darkness... but a Church full of candles, a world of people letting God's light shine, Can drive all the darkness away.

It is God's way. It was God's way in Christ - the light of God's love shines in Him, but he called others, and calls others still, calls us, to see the light and let it shine through us into the world - wider brighter than it can through any one of us alone...

God's gets personal with us - that we might personally be witnesses to God's presence and power... You've heard the call. Some emptiness in you, or some yearning not quite satisfied, or some pull that the Sabbath need in us wants met. And we know, deep down, soul serious, we know, God getting serious with us as God's persons.

The stories of God's people, of David, and Jonah and Job, of Peter and Paul, of John And Mary and Martha... tell us of God's presence up close and personal... David and Goliath, a story of our God inspired valor - but David and Bathsheba, too, our vulnerability; Jonah and our flights from facing tough times; Job and the challenge of our human struggles, Peter and the rocks of faith we can become.... And Paul and the power of God's call to change the course of our lives. Of Mary and Martha and the challenges in our lives of busyness and needing the balance of thoughtfulness.

Our faith story, and stories, are the story of a God who knows us as persons, who has been and is present with us in the most personal of situations. A God, who, in turn calls us to be God's face and hands and feet, and voice - in God's world.

I suspect this sense of God's call to us, God's presence with us and call to be at work in the world, was no more evident than in the life of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Very human soul that King was, with strengths and weaknesses, like us all, if a bit larger in life than any of us. Clearly he heard a call, he had a sense of god's presence in his life. How else did he withstand the pressures the world put upon him, how else did he serve his cause and God's purpose without looking for or demanding a worldly reward of riches...?

He heard in God's word a call for justice and he preached that word in the pulpit and in the public square... He heard a word - and the word directed his life ...I suppose that the saddest fact of King's life, the memory of which we celebrate tonight and tomorrow here in West Bloomfield, ... was the response in our country to his murder....

Where King, in the name and spirit of Christ, would have called for peaceful protest, without his voice and presence, the man who practiced non-violence, who sought justice but peacefully, is remembered too much with the riots that tore apart our city and other's like it.

Sadly.... We can, even in the presence of those who speak God's word and will to us most clearly, we can still be stone deaf - forgetting faithlessly God's presence, God's personal passionate powerful presence with us in Christ Jesus. The Prince of peace

That's why the habit of worship is so vital to our faith and so good for us... for it links us together, binds us with one another, calls us to, enables us to, be strength for one another. And help one another stay focused on God's word and way for us to live.

At any given moment some of us will be tested by life and its struggles and our faith in a loving God will be at risk --- Disease, and disorder, disappointments and death descend upon us and we feel no sense of a loving Father God, but only the misfortunes of fate...

But if we let ourselves be drawn together with others, in the family of faith, in the Body of Christ, then, then, here, we can find the friendship and care and love we need, and also the reminders from others that we need - that God cares - knows our names, numbers our hairs, hears our prayers, and claims us as God's own forever children.

In the face of life's challenges, we can choose to trust the God who has chosen us. The words came from Jesus.... To his first disciples, Come and See, who I am. And he was the word of God and God's love, in flesh appearing. He was God's very personal presence with us...

Tina Samples, a worship leader, experienced the wonder of God getting personal with us at the bedside of Pete, a dying parishioner. In the intense struggle of life against death, Tina used music as a way to celebrate God's presence.

She sang to patients to calm them - and she sang to Peter. She sang Amazing Grace in the hope that it would comfort the dying man and his family. But after the first verse the man's wife said - almost vehemently... ..Sing Jesus loves me.... Sing... Jesus loves me. And Tina did... And... the room full of family, and even the medical staff present, joined in.

And ,Tina said, it was a strangely wonderful magic moment. The man, in the middle of his death throes, still was able to sing a word or two - and, quite quickly became calm.... And tears came to his eyes - and as the song ended...Yes, Jesus loves me, Yes Jesus loves me....

for the Bible tells me so.... With a smile on his face, Peter died. Peter's God had gotten very personal with Peter.....

Come see - Jesus said to his disciples... Come see - who I am.. He says it to us... Come see... Come listen... and hear - and then heed my call. know that you are God's people... the product and subject of God's love for you - a love that will never let you go.

Hear people, and heed my call, to be my people, and to be witnesses to my word in the world. Be a light to the nations and God's good word... This new year let the peace of Christ - God's gift - dwell deeply in you, and guide you to be, by your life, maybe this year by your vote, too, peace makers in Christ's name . And remember his word to you, to be with you always, to the end of the age....

Our God is a very Personal God....Thank God. Amen.

David W. Robertson, Pastor