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The Trouble With God!

1 Samuel 3:1-20

Mark 2:23 – 3:6

Last Sunday was Trinity Sunday – the day on which we remember that God is much bigger than we can understand or explain. And we talk again about what it is like to experience God. The doctrine of the Trinity is the Church's best attempt to explain this God we have come to know as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. In the doctrine of the Trinity we affirm that God is ONE God, but is best described as One God in Three Persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is both paradoxical and the best the Church can do to explain God's nature. The doctrine of the Trinity is a particularly Christian Doctrine, but the experience of a God that is much bigger than we can fully know or understand is not only the experience of Christians.

Last week, we read from Isaiah 6 of Isaiah's experience of meeting God and of being called to serve as a prophet. Isaiah's experience of God involved heavenly beings, thunder, smoke and foundations being shaken like an earthquake. Standing in God's presence provoked Isaiah to say, "Woe is me!" and to experience a cleansing and forgiveness that allowed him to be in relationship with this awesome, giant, thunderous God whose very robe filled the temple.

This week we read the story from 1 Samuel of the experience that the small boy, Samuel, had of meeting God. Samuel's experience of being called to be a prophet is the polar opposite of Isaiah's experience. In this story, God persistently calls quietly to the young boy Samuel as he is getting ready to sleep in the temple at Shiloh where he served as an apprentice to the Priest Eli. But, here God's voice is not thunderous or smoky. Apparently, the voice is so familiar and tender that Samuel thinks that it is the voice of his teacher who has cared for him since he was a little boy. And here, the encounter with God provokes not fear and dread, but obedience and perplexity. "here I am, what do you need? Why did you call me?" says Samuel three times before Eli realizes what is going on. And even then, God speaks in a tone and in words that a young boy could understand, like a teacher or friend explaining a difficult reality. Samuel clearly understands what God has said, because he is reluctant to relay the message to the old priest Eli the next morning.

These two experiences of meeting God could not be more different. So which is right? Is God fearsome, thunderous and giant? Or is God tender, close and able to explain things in terms that a small boy can understand?

The trouble with God is – God is both. In ways that we cannot understand God is both Great and Intimate. God is both powerful and gentle. God is both demanding and full of grace. God is ultimate and engaged in history, and both loving and just, in ways that we just cannot understand. God is the Creator and Ruler of the Universe. God is ultimate and eternal. And God was fully present in the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth. God is both.

And that is the trouble with God. The trouble with God is that God is ultimate and we are not. God is the only being at the center of the universe. God is the only one worthy of love or obedience. And that often causes us trouble.

Even if we say that we believe in God and love God, we human beings like to think that we are wise and know God's plan pretty well. We like to think that we have a pretty clear view of reality, and we like to believe that we are right most of the time. The trouble is that if God alone is truth and wisdom and eternal, then then we are not those things. The trouble with God is that God is ultimate. And if that is true, then we are not. The trouble with God is that God is eternal and all powerful, and if that is true then we are not. The trouble with God is that loving and humble obedience are the ways to know God, and that sort of surrender is not our first choice. That is the trouble with God.

And today's scriptures give us some vivid examples of how the reality of God can conflict with our perceived reality and how that is troublesome for us.

In 1st Samuel we learn that the priest Eli and his sons had been presiding over the worship at Shiloh for many years. And we learn that Eli's sons, Hophni and Phineas, were using their position to enrich themselves and were abusing their power for their own purposes. They thought that God was not watching, or did not know. And even when their father, Eli, warned them of their sin, they continued to act as if they were the ultimate authority. Scripture says that when people in authority use their position and power for their own power, security or wealth, that God knows and that this behavior will have painful consequences. Eli's sons, knew the Law – better than most anyone. But they used the Law of God and their position as priests to enrich themselves and to get what they wanted. NO doubt they would have protested their innocence and pledged an ethics investigation! They were God's priests for crying out loud. But Scripture records that they were using their authority for our own benefit and pleasure. And Scripture also records the historical account of how their authority, power and privilege were no protection against the truth and justice of God.

But while Hophni and Phineas would not listen, Samuel, lying near the Ark of the Covenant, was listening. God called to Samuel like a beloved teacher speaks to a student. "Samuel, Samuel!" And Samuel, in loving obedience goes to see what Eli needs. When those in authority believe themselves untouchable and all powerful, and when those in authority use their own position and power to benefit only themselves, then God goes elsewhere. And the message that God gives to Samuel is of consequences so terrible that God says, they will make both ears of those who hear about it "tingle". Arrogance and abuse of power cannot continue forever if God is the Ruler of the Universe.

One of the things that makes the Scriptures so remarkable is that the history is not written to make the Jews or the early disciples look good, wise or right. When both the Jews and the early disciples looked back on their history, their assessment is clear-eyed and sober. When the Jews looked back on the defeat of Israel at the hands of the Philistines and the capture of the Ark of the Covenant, they looked at that horrible sequence of events and said, these terrible things were the logical consequence of our Sins. They did not say, “We did the best we could and God was just unfair.” Instead, they wrote their history so that they wouldn’t forget what happens when we don’t live as if God is the Ultimate Ruler of the Universe – the source, guide and goal of all that is. And the disciples recorded themselves stories of all the times they got it wrong and failed to understand what Jesus was saying. They wrote it down to provide us with a warning of what happens if we forget that God alone is God.

The Pharisees had confused love of God with love of the Law and their need to be in charge became more important than being faithful to God. They rightly believed that God gave the Law – here the Law to observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy – for our guidance and out of love. The problem was that they appointed themselves as those who could judge in God’s stead. They became more concerned to make sure that others obeyed the Law as they interpreted it, than they were concerned that the Law be a means by which the hearts and minds of the people were converted to loving obedience. The Law is a guide for how to live in a way that reflects the fact that God – not we human beings – are ultimate and essential and eternal. But, the Pharisees reveal in Mark’s Gospel that they had made the Law an idol or a way to maintain their own authority, rather than a tool to help the people love God. I think that they did this with the best of intentions. They wanted the people to do exactly what God had commanded. But in making sure that everyone observed the commandments they lost sight of the commandment that was the greatest: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind and strength and your neighbor as yourself. They were sincerely wrong. So, when Jesus’ disciples eat grain that they picked from the field on a Sabbath when they are hungry, the Pharisees are looking for legal trespassers. And when Jesus heals a man in the Temple, their motives are clearly revealed. If they had remembered that God is ultimate – not the Law and not their opinion – and if they had remembered that the Law was a tool to help us love as God loves, then they would not have missed the messenger that God sent to tell them about God’s love. If they had not placed themselves in the middle as the ultimate arbiters and judges, then they would have been able to rejoice over the man’s healing.

Years ago, one of our daughters (who will remain nameless to protect the guilty) asked to do something that I judged was not a good idea. She was furious with me, and pulled out every reason in the book why she should be allowed to do as she wished. When I still refused to allow her to do as she asked, she said, “You are ruining my life!” The problem with God is that until we acknowledge God’s ultimate authority, wisdom and love, it seems to us that God is “ruining our lives!”

Both of these stories from Scripture scare me a little bit. Think for a moment about the ways in which we, and the leadership in our businesses and governments at every level seem to be

using our power and position to protect, secure and enrich ourselves – often even under the cover of the “law”. And think for a moment how very often we believe that we are right, and that our opinion is God’s. And consider if you and I have ever condemned another person for doing something that we were SURE was wrong?

God’s goal in the world is redemption, reconciliation and love. God calls us to humble and obedient service to those goals. The Law of God was intended to be a means of grace that helped us grow into loving obedience. Instead, human beings turn the Law into a weapon by which we prove our own authority and worth, and with which we judge and condemn others. In Mark, the Pharisees judge and condemn God’s own self – the very Son God sent to call them to loving obedience.

If we want to be people of God, then we need to take a lesson from Scripture and make a relentless self- evaluation of the many ways in which we believe and act as if we – and NOT God – are ultimate and true and loving. When we are not willing to see how we use our position for our own purposes and how we refuse to be obedient out of love, then we perceive that God is the problem.

You and I cannot fully know God. God is the Ruler of the Universe – eternal and known to us in love. The closest we can come to describing God is to talk about the Trinity. But when we put ourselves – or anything else other than the God we know in Christ – at the center – when we make any other goal or desire ultimate – then we bring destruction upon ourselves. The trouble is not God.

God came that we might know love, receive life and be reconciled to God in loving obedience. When we ignore or refuse that, the trouble is us.