

## Proper VI Year B 2024

More and more I have found the life of faith more about questions than answers. After all, theology is imaginative speculation. Y'all hear me say that a lot. I've long thought faith was more about the process of discovery. The word theology literally means God knowledge... but the word knowledge is perhaps a misnomer because what knowledge we presume to have as to the nature of God is based on mere speculation. There is no place in scripture that offers a systematic theology, that is, there is no definitive analysis as to the nature of God. Only signs of God's presence... in metaphor, in myth; places where God has been, as it were; only imaginative speculation in hindsight. Theologians have stayed up late into many nights to systematize the theologies of God, and have presumed to call it doctrine. In a moment of self-disclosure in Exodus God simply says to Moses, "I am who I am." God thrives in mystery.

That is not to say that our speculations are wrong necessarily or misguided. I have great faith in the human imagination's uncanny ability to apprehend the truth of things. I have great faith in the inspired written word, and its place in our collective religious and spiritual consciousness. But theology evolves, changes with new knowledge, and experience. The point I want to make is that because we are always living in a new context... presently called post-modernity... we have to read scripture not as some formulaic doctrine, or as monolithic truth etched in stone... we have to approach scripture with the expectation of discovery, recognizing that God is still revealing Godself. The task for us post-modern Christians is to read our sacred lore bringing our world and its unique

complexity face to face with these ancient texts, and discern what God is saying to us in our own time and place. In other words, as the world changes, our understanding of God changes. And perhaps God's understanding of the world changes and evolves as well. To know where we are theologically, and where we're going, it's helpful to know where we've been.... So, if you'll indulge me, something of a review here.

One of our units of study in the Rector's Forum is entitled "the three great theologies." Again, theology is speculative, hypothetical, as it were; but there are patterns that run throughout scripture. Theologians have coined, categorized three patterns in speaking of God as described in Holy Scripture: The first is Theism. This is the most familiar to us, particularly in the modern west. It's the theology that church deems as orthodox. Theism holds that God is male, and is decidedly apart from the created order. This God resides in the heavens and from time to time intercedes in creation, or not. This God is all knowing, unchanging, all powerful. This God is ultimate truth, but distant and unknowable. This God created the universe and set it in motion according to natural law. In Theism Jesus is the go-between, if you will, between The God of the heavens and the people God loves on earth. Apropos of my belief that culture has and has had a profound influence on theology over the ages, Theism, dare I say, mimics the ethos of empire... God rules as a king, an emperor, in a rigid hierarchy, lording such power somewhat capriciously over the realm of earth. But perhaps most importantly, Theism has sadly offered us a way to abdicate our own responsibility. We have consigned God to the heavens... safe and distant,

who, we are hopeful, that over the course of time, God will act to restore the fallen world. Theism has not served us well.

The second theology is liberation. This theology holds that God's principal aim for God's people is freedom, and in particular, freedom from the oppressive structures of society. Sin for the liberation theologian is that which denies dignity and well-being to the under-privileged, the disadvantaged, the oppressed... the so-called non-persons in the language of 20<sup>th</sup> century Liberation Theology. The account of the Exodus of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt in Hebrew scripture is the principal narrative of this theology. Matthew picks up on this theme in the New Testament and refers to the Jesus movement as the new Exodus... In particular, freedom from the oppression of Roman occupation. This theology, as one might imagine, has found commerce among people who live in oppressed countries... in Latin and South America.... In Africa, and Asia... among African American communities in our own country. People in Black churches know well the story of the Exodus. They know well the thirst for freedom. The liberation theologians proposed the idea that God has a particular passion for the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized.

The third theology is process. The term, process theology, was coined by Alfred North Whitehead in the early twentieth century. This theology holds that God is not unchanging; but that God is evolving as the creation evolves. That God learns through experience... that God does not exercise God's power through omnipotent coercion, or force, but through intimate persuasion. This theology is similar to the pantheistic religions

which believe that all things are of God's very being... that God is not aloof and other, but that God is intimately connected with a creation that is still becoming.... That God is becoming, growing, as the creation grows and becomes. In this theology there is no hard and fast plan in God's mind, only possibility; Love being the guiding premise that is being improvised amid the random unfolding of the universe. This theology is most present in the mystic traditions among the many religions around the world.

I have of course over-simplified... but all three of these theologies have ample warrant in the Bible, in both Hebrew scripture and New Testament literature. Sometimes they overlap. Sometimes they actually compete for attention... So I want to suggest today that even though Theism is what most of us grew up with, and were taught in Sunday school... I want to suggest that the theologies of liberation and process speak more eloquently of a God who is present in creation. In both of these theologies God's love is contingent to the choices of those who follow God... that is, God's love depends on the people with whom God is in radical partnership. That is what Incarnation is... Jesus being the archetype of the human community... Incarnation means that Love requires flesh and blood... and flesh and blood are process, and change, and transformation, and contingency, and inter-dependence..... and real.

So here's another something to think about: What if God is process; what if God is not a discreet being wholly apart from us, but that God is the very process of becoming in which we live and move and have our being? What if this promised kingdom of God is not

some utopian dream... some future hope, or some reward in the next life. What if God's kingdom were the here and now, just as the world is... the here and now in all of its complexity, and uncertainty... that suffering and joy, both, were rudiments of the kingdom of God. What if the gospels are clues as to how to live in the kingdom as it is, in all of its terror and beauty... What if our life as the baptized is not to bring about the kingdom of God, but to practice the art of Love within its vast complexity? What if the kingdom of God were no kingdom at all, but a community of equals and shared abundance?

That is what I believe the gospel of Mark is about. Mark's theology is decidedly process: How to live in the kingdom of God that is here and now; immediate, as Mark puts it... so speculate with me with regard to the passage we just read. "The kingdom of God is as if" .... Not the kingdom will be... but the kingdom of God is "as if" someone would scatter seed on the ground... "as if," that's subjunctive. A hypothetical.... The subjunctive mood is the linguistic expression of possibility... the kingdom of God is the process of the possible. The scattering of seed is our participation in the process.... The ends are not the thing; the future is not the thing. God's kingdom is about the means of love. God is in the process. God is the process....

The seeds in the parable, of course, are acts of love... Love that even in small seemingly mundane acts, produces the fruits of dignity and well-being. We aren't called to plant the seeds of some glorious species, a sequoia, a cedar of Lebanon... we are to plant common shrubs, like a mustard plant. God's love is manifest in the small and the common.

But Love ramifies beyond our preconceptions and expectations. Love changes things. Love is all we have to give. Could it be that our singular vocation as the baptized is to stand in the midst of this ambiguous and complicated life... a life of random contingency... a life of infinite possibility... and bring Love to bear? Do you believe that Love is the very means of God in this process we have named creation? Do you believe that Love is enough.... Enough to redeem the seemingly intractable brokenness of our world. I would not be in this pulpit if I didn't believe that Love is enough.

The days of faith being a private matter must end. We need to be activists and advocates for Love. That is what seed planting is all about.... The process requires our enlightened participation; our informed imaginations. Give yourself to the process that is God at work creating a just world still... a world full of possibility still becoming; a world in which life's abundance is meant for all... Be the flesh and blood blessed, broken, and given for the world's nurture and its transformation. Don't be daunted by the vast complexity of it all; know that Love is enough.

Brothers and sisters, We are the bearers of the Holy Spirit sent into the world for its transformation, to raise up to dignity the ones left out... to liberate those held captive to the hardness of empire... We live in the world of "as if." We act as if love is real, and that Love will redeem all in all. Let's not allow Love to be a mere hypothetical idea .... In a world of infinite possibility, let's work to make it real.