

Bristol Lutheran

All Saints

Jonah 1-4

11-6-2016

Where's God?

My good friend Sarah called me this week. Out of the blue. She has been battling what she thought was a bad cough and cold, but it lingered. So after going to the doctor, they recognized it was more serious than an autumn cold, and she was admitted Wed to Mayo in Rochester.

After running tests, they found a enlarged lymph node – tennis ball size, when it should be a pea – she texted us. The fear is lymphoma. She is 34 years old.

Where's God?

We beg and plead that question – when we face things that we don't like – don't understand. We look to blame something, someone, often God when bad things happen to us.

It happens with cancer. It happens with natural disaster. Or Community tragedy. Or Wars. Or when our political candidate loses. It happens when our sports teams come out on the wrong end – as if God is controlling every home run, or every fumble.

Where is God?

What we often forget – is that God is not in the business of causing evil, causing sin, causing bad outcomes. Much of that is due to human nature. And when we are corrupted by evil and sadness and anger and bad stuff around us – it is almost impossible to recognize God's presence.

And we ask that question.

And probably ask that question most often, when we are faced with death. Whether the death is 94 year old or a 43 year old. Whether the person never missed church, or never came. Whether it was an expected death after a long battle or more sudden. Where is God.

What I know, what I believe – is God is there. Where can we flee from your presence – no where. Psalm 139 is one of my favorites to pray with families before we ever go into the funeral service – because of the beautiful promise God gives.

Jonah wanted to flee. He tried. Ninevah –that evil city - was proud of killing people. Any of us would have fled.

But God, for some reason, stuck by him. Saved him. And continued to call him.

Thrown overboard. Swallowed by a fish. Prayer for three days in the belly of a fish. Vomited up on the ground. Called again.

As much as we think this story is about a fish – fish is mentioned twice – God, Lord is used 28 times. This story is about God's unwavering presence to all people. Repentant, and unrepentant. Saint and sinner. God is there.

But so easily we forget.

Forget that goes with us wherever we go, even the belly of a fish. Jonah forgot that God's presence is even with people to whom we give no credence or credit.

Jonah was ticked that God chose to love and save the people of Ninevah. God's compassion and love may surprise us, because it is extraordinary. God proves to act in compassion to both, the ungodly city and the servant, who isn't acting as God commands.

We want God to destroy our enemy. To take out revenge. To banish the terrorists and murderers from heaven. To kill the bad and save the good. But God doesn't work that way. God shows mercy and compassion, beyond our comprehension. When heaven comes, when we gather with all the saints, we won't be able to separate good from the bad – because everyone will be good.

Because God transforms, reforms us. When all the saints gather around God's table, we won't be able to point out any wrong in others. God has reformed your heart for worship now, today. And that is an unimaginable gift. God reforms the hearts of all – name them Bin Laden, Hussein, ISIS,

Hitler - after death, and in life again they too are given the promise of newness, renewal. The old is gone, the new has come.

Because heaven isn't granted based on anything we did. But only on the grace of God through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The story of Jonah is about sighting God in the most unusual people and places. Seeing God's presences, God's love and acceptance, even to those who we want destroyed.

This story is our story. God's presence and journey with us, especially in our stubborn rebellion. God's forgiveness of us – regardless of our ability or inability to confess or repent.

God has the power to do that. To create community where all are saints. It is what God does. God shows us over and over again, how we have more in common with all other human beings, than what we perceive.

Our ideologies may differ.

Our sports alliances may differ.

Our sexuality may differ.

Our good works, or evil deeds – may differ.

Our presidential candidates and their supporters *may* disagree. And many people, across the spectrum of partisanship, have acted in ways that are unacceptable as we seek to love our neighbors.

Many people have said and done things in 'support' of their candidates, that demean other human beings.

Because we forget – the same way Jonah forgot – that despite our antagonism towards each other, we are all created in the image of God, and deserve fellowship with our Lord and creator. God doesn't accept our sin, but God redeems us from it.

God's knowledge is beyond us and his acts of love are extensive beyond our imaginations. Our call as the church as Christ's disciples, is to find a way to emulate such acts of love, to be echoes of God, mirror images of God.

Do we follow that call? Do we love one another as children of God, flaws and all, to be God's presence to others ...or do we flee the other direction?

Where is God?

I had no idea what to say to my friend Sarah. Scared, doubting, questioning. I listened. I cried. I prayed. The words that echoed in my mind – only by the Holy Spirit – were the words God uses to comfort us most... Do not be afraid. I am here.

In pending cancer diagnoses.

In the belly of fish. With an unrepentant city and people and a lousy, half-hearted prophet.

With us, and our loved ones, saints on earth, and in heaven – the sinners inside church, and at home.

God is here. In life. In death. And in life again.

What God does matters. And God shows up.

There is nowhere God won't go, nothing God won't do to be with us and save us. A cross. An empty tomb. A handful of water. A loaf of bread and a cup of wine. A promise. There is God.