

Looking for God

The Rev. Canon Paul Bresnahan

The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 24, October 22, 2017

My grandmother sent me to church when I was just a boy. I was 9 years old at the time. She was hoping it might cheer me up to go to church. My dad had died the previous Christmas and I needed some cheering up. I've told you all this before, but there's more.

Every Sunday she gave me a quarter and sent me on my way, with strict instructions to put that quarter in the plate when it came around. Mostly that quarter made it there, although I do remember one time when my brother and I stopped by the Borden's Ice Cream shop instead of going to church. We loved to watch Elsie the Cow move her head back and forth upon the wall. Thus that quarter intended for St James's Church made it into our stomachs instead via the vehicular means of two scoops of ice cream each. Confession is good for the soul!

St James's was a magnificent example of Romanesque Revival architecture. I loved sitting under the great tower of the church where I could stare high into heaven. At least that's what it seemed like to me. There was nothing like that in my dingy old inner city neighborhood. It was magnificent in there. The light from the early morning sun streamed into the church through magnificent stained glass windows and bathed the old oak pews with a rainbow of refracted beauty.

There was a lovely lady by the name of Iris Morgan who worshipped there and when I got liturgically lost at the reading of the Psalter, which I always did, she would step across the aisle and quietly pass me her very own prayer book so that I could sound out the sacred words inscribed upon the page. She was so kind. I always made sure her prayer book made it back to her as soon as I found my place which she enjoyed helping me do.

I remember when we came to that special prayer; the one that starts "Our Father who art in heaven". I'd look up into the clerestory of that sacred space, but I could not see my father or "Our Father". But I could see "art" in the church, there was "art" everywhere I looked in the church. It was beautiful. It left me wondering, pondering about the mystery of it all.

There were religious people in our family who said my dad couldn't go to heaven because he didn't go to church. And its true, the only time I heard my dad use our Lord's Name was when he lost a bet at the race track. Still, I thought it was mean to tell a child that not only would he never see his dad again in this life, he wouldn't see him in the next either. Thankfully, except

for my grandmother, my immediately family were not religious at all. My agnostic uncle used to tell me that my dad would get into heaven a whole lot sooner than that crowd would.

That's why I looked so hard to see God and my dad in the Holy Place and that's why I think I kept going back to church. Somewhere in the sacred mystery of it all, God would show me something of the Glory of the Holy One. I loved those words in fact printed in gold above the High Altar; "Holy, Holy, Holy." I still love those words.

Moses apparently had a similar kind of heart to heart conversation with God as we read in today's first lesson. What a fascinating encounter; Moses said, "Show me your glory, I pray."

God said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, 'The Lord'; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But, God said, "you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live." God continued, "See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen."

When I first heard this lesson, I was somewhat satisfied. After all, I reasoned to myself, if Moses could not see God face to face, neither could I.

Earlier on, Moses met God at the burning bush and received his marching orders. And then on and on it went. There were the plagues, and then the parting of the Red Sea. God brought the people up out of slavery in Egypt. In the wilderness he fed them with the Bread of Angels and with quail. God gave them water from a rock, then the Law. We've been following the whole sacred cycle of stories in the Church's lectionary over yea these many weeks.

There was a time when Moses had had seen God "face to face" in the Tent of Meeting and in the wake of the encounter his face would shine like the sun.

But now something changed. The people had sinned against God. This sin, this disobedience erected a wall between them and God. Now then, Moses could only see God's backside. In our spiritual journeys we know all too well that when there is a distance between us and God it is established not by God but by ourselves.

"If God seems far away, guess who moved!" as the old saying goes.

So here we are now, suspended in faith. I use that word "suspend" carefully. The 17th century theologian Blaise Pascal was also a brilliant mathematician and a renaissance man in his own right. He noticed that we are "suspended" between the two infinities; the infinitely large and the infinitely small. Our microscopes and telescopes only tell part of the tale. It is in the brilliant minds of our mathematicians and physicists that we get any sense for the dimension and mystery of that statement. Astronomers have recently reported that the collision of two neutron stars has given us more evidence of a universe of even greater mystery than our minds can really fathom. For instance, it is in these enormous cataclysmic events that the tiniest new particles on the periodic tables are discovered. A recent issue of The Atlantic has given us a glimpse into what we are just beginning to discover of what it is to be suspended as we are between the two infinities. I love science. To me it is all part and parcel of the Glory of God!

But back to Moses. God said; "I will let my Glory pass by but you can only see my back when I do." You can only "catch" God in a moment, and when you do God has already moved on. Much as we might wish we cannot put God in a box. Just like Jesus taught you cannot put people into classification boxes either, by race, ethnicity, tribe, class, gender, orientation, health, wealth and so on and so on. But living this way as Jesus did caused problems, didn't it?

Jesus also has his problems with "religious people" as we know all too well. I'm sure you noticed the setup in today's Gospel when the Pharisees put it to Jesus; it began innocently enough; "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality."

So far so good. But then they cooked up a little scheme. Let's see if we can catch him on the matter of taxation? If we get him to say "pay your taxes" then the rebellious sectarian nationalists will reject him but if he says; "don't pay your taxes" then we can have him arrested by the Roman authorities. What a splendid political "Catch 22". So they asked him; "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" He was onto them and he knew they were in cahoots against him.

The Gospel reading continues; "But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the

emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away."

You and I both know that what was "amazing" in Jesus' reply was that we all know what belongs to Caesar and we all know what belongs to God. Caesar can have his taxes, the sectarians can have their violent rebellions. Roman armies can put the rebellions down. That's just history.

But God has my life. God gave that to me and yours to you. And God gives us forgiveness and eternal life too. God gave my dad life. In this life I know I will never see him face to face again as I know I will not see God or Jesus face to face.

But I see you. You are the living evidence now of the Risen Christ. Paul pulls no punches on that fact in today's Epistle. He begins; "Grace to you and peace. We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. The gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction"

As you proclaim the Gospel of joy and resurrection and forgiveness in your lives, so too you encourage one another and grow in faith within yourselves and among us all.

It is in just such a sacred space as this that we all discover something holy both in ourselves and in one another. These sacred spaces and you sacred people are changing lives every day. My prayer is that each one of us will in some way or another be someone's Iris Morgan. When we get liturgically lost in our lives would that some kindly person show us a sacred text to live by. There are so many people who need the healing touch of human and Godly love, so many who need forgiveness, and God knows, so very many who need to be reconciled. Being the Christ in this world is such a mighty challenge. May every human heart be so touched with a glimpse of the Glory of God.

In the Name of God, the Most Holy, Undivided and Everlasting Trinity.

Fr. Paul