

February 14, 2016

Lent 1

Deut 26: 1-11, Luke 4: 1-13

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*The year's at the spring,
And day's at the morn;
Morning's at seven;
The hill-side's dew-pearled;
The lark's on the wing;
The snail's on the thorn;
God's in His heaven—
All's right with the world!*

That little ditty was written in 1841 by the poet, Robert Browning. Apparently it is from a controversial collection of dramatic pieces which I don't know anything about – but I sure remember this little charming piece, in particular the last line: **“God's in His heaven and all's right with the world.”**

It became one of those little quips that anyone over the age of 40 may have even used now and then when describing a good day.

It is a classic description of how we saw the world for a very long time and answered the question, “Where is God?” We saw the world as a three-tiered universe, with heaven above where God lived, the world below where we lived; and the underworld, where we feared we might go after death.

On this first Sunday of Lent our theme is that very question: “Where is God?” For many, many centuries – the answer would have been similar to these words from Browning: God is in His heaven. Even if all was not right with the world --- **God was still in heaven.**

Diana Butler Bass, author of the new book Grounded, which is shaping our Lenten Season, writes:

“The role of the church was to mediate the space between heaven and earth, acting as a kind of holy elevator, wherein God sent down divine directions and, if we obeyed the directives, we would go up – eventually – to live in heaven forever and avoid the terrors below. Stories and sermons taught us that God occupied the high places, looking over the world and caring for it from afar, existing outside space and time, (pg. 25) occasionally interrupting the course of human affairs with some miraculous reminder of divine power...Religious authorities mediated the gap, explaining right doctrine and holy living. If you wanted to live with God forever in heaven, then you listened to them, believed, and obeyed.” (Pg. 4)

Diana goes on to describe *how the theologians of Western Christianity developed a language about God called "the omnis". God was omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient: all-powerful, in all places, and all-knowing.*" (Pg. 25)

For a very long time this idea of a three-tiered universe and the belief that "God is in His heaven – All's right with the world!" seemed to hold sway – until the last century when its certainty crumbled. It began crumbling after the Great War caused its philosophical and political foundations to wobble and it then collapsed completely after World War II when the Nazis and the Holocaust and the bomb shattered history.

Writers like Dietrich Bonhoeffer who awaited execution in a Nazi prison understood that the three-tiered universe with its majestic God had been swept away by the war, as did Jewish humanist and survivor of the death camps, Elie Wiesel who wrote about witnessing a child hanging on the gallows. Some theologians and philosophers even proclaimed "the death of God". (Bass Pg. 4-5)

According to Diana, as we humans are so prone to do --- after the war was over, we regular people did not take these theologians and philosophers seriously. Soldiers wanted to come home and get back to their normal lives. The revival of religion and the three-tiered way of thinking about God and religion swept through Western nations to restore order and familiarity, first in the 1950's and then again in the 1970's. (Pg. 5)

This church building, like many others, was built just before or during these years of revival. Lots of babies were being born – lots of people to be baptized and taught how to follow the Christian rules of the road. The Church in America had full pews and exercised a great deal of influence in people's lives and in the political world. The majority of us grew up and/or raised children during that time and remember it well.

However, no matter how hard we tried to maintain the notion of the three-tiered universe and that God was in his heaven and all was right with the world --- it was not – and much of what was wrong was due to the institutional Church itself which was inflicting great pain and violence on many people across the planet. (Pg. 5) Millions of people began to reject religion -- and in response the Fundamentalists started preaching even louder and holding on even tighter for fear of change – but the diaspora had already begun, people were leaving the church.

Today the God of the three-tiered universe holds no water for many of us, any more than the idea of a hell below us does, no matter how many Fundamentalist might try to convince us otherwise.

As Butler-Bass say's so well: ***"We have discovered that we are fully capable of creating the terrors of hell right here and no longer need a lake of fire to prove the existence of evil – and we have found that the ranks of saints and angels seem to have thinned and that no deity will be sending miracles to fix the mess we are in."***

On the other hand, the question of where is God --- for many of us --- still remains because it is simply part of our make-up and fabric. There simply has to be another option between fundamentalism and a deceased God.

This is where the Spiritual Revolution comes in that Butler-Bass believes we are in the midst of – many of us are finding and proclaiming another option for answering the question: “Where is God?” Again, Butler –Bass say’s it well: **“If hell has moved in next door to us, perhaps heaven has as well.”**

Where is God? God is with us. God is not omni anything –but **inter: the spiritual thread between space and time; or intra, within space and time; and infra, that which holds space and time. God is not above or beyond, but integral to the whole of creation, entwined with the sacred ecology of the universe.** (Pg 25)

God is with human and animal victims of war, terrorism, and natural disasters.

God is with the Syrians fleeing for safety.

God is with the children and parents of Flint, Michigan.

God is with the valorous who run toward burning buildings or navigate flooding streets, and with those who mourn and doubt and even despair. (Pg. 8)

Jewish scholar Abraham Heschel referred to this God as the God of pathos, who loves the world profoundly, feels with creation, and participates in its life. (Pg. 9)

And so when we go to read the Bible we read it with the image of God as being entwined with the universe rather than looking down from above – we hear today’s readings and know that God was with Jesus in the dessert as he fought those inner voices some call “the devil”. He leaned on that presence as he held up under the pressure of temptation; he was wise enough to remember to lean on God while many of us forget. God was not up above looking down upon this poor man alone in the dessert, purposely setting him up to suffer in order to prove something.

And in Deuteronomy, God was with the Hebrews when they joyfully brought the first fruits of their labor to the temple in gratitude for a homeland and food on their table that they had grown themselves rather than as slaves to Pharaoh. God is in their gratitude and celebration as opposed to directing them from the heavens to give in order to appease or seek approval.

According to Butler-Bass, this is the spiritual revolution that is moving across the world. **We are understanding God as being “Grounded” here in the midst of all of this. It is no longer vertical theology – God does not “live” in the heaven or on the mountaintop or in the steeple of the church – God is found in and within the world.**

And while this is new for many --- it is actually very old as the mystics of every faith have experienced and “known” this, however --- it has always caused a chill of fear down the spine of

the Fundamentalist because a Grounded God is harder to “control” and no longer belongs just to the ministers, rabbis, priests or gurus.

According to Butler-Bass, and I would concur, re-locating God from the heavens above, to with and within the world, has sweeping social and political consequences. To relocate God within the world is to re-ground our own lives as it makes us much more responsible for the heaven or the hell we create here, doesn't it?

The problem of evil is real and we human beings create the vast majority of what we deem evil. It is not God's doing.

An indwelling God provides a spirit of compassion that breathes hope and healing here. **God --- if you will --- is waiting for our most HUMANE selves to show up and quit following the gods of greed and revenge. God instead is asking us ---- “Where are you? Where are your humane and compassionate selves?”**

I can most certainly remember growing up with the three-tiered universe as part of my life's canvas – but it didn't really fit with my deeper experience as a child or as a young adult. It was not until I was introduced to the German theologian, Paul Tillich in seminary who confessed that a “certain God had died on the battlefields of Europe” that I found the language for the God I knew in my heart. He described God as **“The Ground of all Being” ...a numinous presence at the center of all things.”** When I read those words I knew I had found the God I had felt and experienced all along. It was like a breath of fresh air. If some big-wig German theologian could teach and write about that kind of God --- then I must not be crazy after all... It was okay to not believe that God was in his heavens and so “all was right with the world” --- in fact God is -- as Robert Browning wrote - in the dew of the morning and in the wonder of a newborn child. God is within the heart of Jesus as he struggled in the dessert to make sense of the warring voices inside his head. God is in the anger of those who are fighting for justice – for equal pay and the rights of women to care for their bodies and in the kayakers who are protecting our waters from the giant Shell Company.

Diana Butler Bass writes in her book:

The spiritual revolution that we are in the midst of proclaims that God is the ground, the grounding and that which grounds us. We experience this when we understand that soil is holy, water gives life, the sky opens the imagination, our roots matter, home is a divine place, and our lives are linked with our neighbors' and with those around the globe. This world, not heaven, is the sacred stage of our times. (Pg. 26)

With this in mind, how then shall we live? **Amen.**

*(Book: Grounded, Finding God in the World, A Spiritual Revolution by Diana Butler Bass, 2015)