

May 29, 2016 Scripture and Sermon

Psalm 96:1-9

O sing to God a new song;
sing to God, all the earth.

Sing to God, bless God's name;
tell of God's salvation
from day to day.

Declare God's glory
among the nations,
God's marvelous works
among all the peoples.

For great is God,
and greatly to be praised;
God is to be revered
above all gods.

For all the gods of the peoples are idols,
but God made the heavens.

Honor and majesty are before God;
strength and beauty are in God's sanctuary.

Ascribe to God, O families of the peoples,
ascribe to God glory and strength.

Ascribe to God the glory
due God's name;
bring an offering,
and come into God's courts.

Worship God in holy splendor;
tremble before God, all the earth.

This is the Word of the Lord, **thanks be to God.**

Luke 7:1-10

After Jesus had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. A centurion there had a slave whom he valued highly, and who was ill and close to death. When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to him, asking him to come and heal his slave. When they came to Jesus, they appealed to him earnestly, saying, "He is worthy of having you do this for him, for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us." And Jesus went with them, but when he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to say to him, "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed. For I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this,' and the slave does it." When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd

that followed him, he said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health.

Let us pray...Amen.

This morning's scripture readings have something important in common: God's heart and ear are open to all, even to those who aren't part of our faith community.

A Roman centurion was a commanding officer in the Roman army. Leading anywhere from 200 to 1000 soldiers, centurions were considered powerful leaders, and were trusted by the Roman leadership to act in Rome's best interests.

By upbringing, by training, and by their cultural customs, centurions would have been steeped in the Roman pagan traditions. They believed that their God was the Caesar, the Roman Emperor. Our gospel reading tells us that this man, this Roman centurion, was good to the Jewish people, he had helped them build their temple, and he had fostered the good will of his neighbors.

Now, the people of Israel were occupied by the Romans. The centurion was the local face of the occupying power, and though he was highly thought of, it would have been expected that the locals would have resented his presence. This is not what we hear from Luke. It would also follow that he would have been skeptical of the Jewish faith at best, and antagonistic toward the faith of the people he was charged with occupying.

This also was not the case. The centurion had heard about Jesus, and believed that Jesus could and would heal his servant. And not up close and personal, the centurion believed that Jesus could heal from a distance! 'Only speak the word and let my servant be healed' he said.

This impressed Jesus mightily, and he healed the centurion's servant, and even commented that he had not found such faith, even among the people of Israel.

So what I want to know is, when we have so many stories from our Holy Bible that tell us that God is the God of more than just the people of Israel, more than just the Christians who came after, more than just the people of Islam, why do some of our brothers and sisters try to make our God an exclusive God? With Elijah healing non-Jews in the Hebrew scripture, with Jesus healing Gentiles in the Gospel, with Paul converting Gentiles in the Epistles, we have ample evidence that we can't keep this amazing God to ourselves. We have ample evidence that this amazing God is big enough to encompass all of creation, all of the universe, all of reality.

Just as we cannot contain God in a room, or in a building, neither can we drive God out of every atom that makes a room or building. Just as we cannot claim to be the sole recipients of God's love, neither can we claim that other faiths have no access to God's love. There are too many examples of miracles and healings and parables that point to the sacredness of others to make any claim of an exclusive relationship with God.

Women at the well, Samaritans, widows who had lost sons, pagans, the list is so long, we couldn't possibly discuss them all. So instead, we'll try and see the big picture, try to see what God wants us to see from all these stories about Gentiles and pagans and foreigners.

When Jesus pointed out to the crowds that the Jewish faith had a long tradition of healing and helping the Gentiles, they tried to run him out of town. When modern thinkers and faith leaders point this out, they are often ridiculed as having an inferior faith.

With all this evidence that our God is a radically inclusive God, why do some followers continue to try and make God exclusive, reserving healing and forgiveness for just a select few? This doesn't make sense to me.

I have been blessed to have been able to travel a bit around the world. And in my travels, I have experienced the presence of the sacred in some very different circumstances. God was present in a Buddhist Ashram, or monastery, just as God was present at a Hindu wedding. God was present at a 5 hour long Eastern Orthodox communion service just as God was present at the top of one of the Austrian Alps. God was present in the waves crashing on the beach of Trinidad and Tobago, just as much as God was present in the Grand Canyon.

Perhaps you have had similar experiences. Perhaps not. Hopefully we all will have experiences that will lead us to understand that the God of Creation is infused in every atom of the universe.

God was present in the people I met, and I could no more force my God upon them than I could drive God out of them. And I believe this is true even of those who professed to have no faith at all.

Our gospel lesson from Luke reminds us that Jesus was moved by the faith of a Roman pagan, a powerful leader of soldiers. Moved to perform a healing from a distance. I believe Jesus can heal from a distance today, too. And can do so for people who aren't Jewish, Christian, or Muslim. The many flocks who are not of our fold, but who are part of creation are as much a part of our community as the centurion was in his community.

We aren't the keepers, the protectors, or the guardians of the faith, we are the sharers, the explainers, and the inviters of the faith. That's why we remind ourselves that our table is set for the whole people of God. That our most sacred meal honoring and remembering our Lord and Savior is open to all who wish to know him.

Our path is specifically Christian. But when our paths cross with someone who is specifically Hindu, or Buddhist, or Atheist, we must be able to recognize the sacred and the powerful in them just as much as we do those with whom we worship. When we open our eyes to the universe, we realize that miracles happen to families that are of different faiths, or of no faith, and tragedies happen to families of different faiths, and of no faith.

Sometimes, when celebrating the life of a person who has passed away, I'll point out that one of the laws of physics, one of the laws of the universe, is that energy is neither created nor destroyed. The energy that we call spirit, or soul, the energy that is the unique thing that makes us all the people we are, is present in every living thing, regardless of faith tradition.

Obviously our sisters and brothers of other faiths possess life energy, even if they don't call it soul or spirit. This alone tells me that God is a more universal presence than we could ever imagine. This picture is a photograph of the God's Eye Nebula, taken by the Hubble telescope. It is millions of light years away, that means that it would take light millions of years to travel from here to there...impossibly large distances, and yet here is this reminder of the God of the Universe, available to all who would look.

I'm probably not doing a very good job of explaining what I think Jesus intended by healing the centurion's slave. He was amazed at the depth of faith of one who was believed to have no faith at all. So let's you and I be amazed at the faith of those who we used to believe had no faith at all.

Let's find ways to invite those of other faiths to be partners in making the world a better place.

Let us strive to have the deepest faith we can, and strive to live our lives faithfully, being radically inclusive of all of God's children, no matter what their faith upbringing. This is what will be at the heart of the new Christian tradition, not exclusion, but inclusion. Not self-righteous indignation, but open-hearted invitation, not judgment, but acceptance of the sacred in all of creation.

If we can do that, we will be practicing the ancient tradition of Elijah, Jesus, Paul, and whole host of biblical greats who's God was big enough to include all of creation.

Amen.