

GROWING UP IN OUR FAITH

Jeremiah 12: 1-4; Mark 9: 30-37

What do you believe about God?... Have your beliefs changed?

My beliefs have changed a lot. Not only have they changed from when I was a child. They've changed since I started ministry. In fact, they're changing all the time. Change doesn't mean inconsistency or variability. Change means growth. Change means that my relationship with the great Other in my life whom I call God is a growing thing. As I come to discover myself in ever new ways, I discover God in new ways too. The two are connected.

Of course, it's not just about me and God in some glass bubble. It's also about me in my relationships and my experiences of life. It's about how I grow as I give and as I receive. It's all part of the journey, and somehow, God is in the midst of all that. God is often in the background, but sometimes in the foreground as well. I may consciously have prayer time with God or commune with God as I worship. But often, through the things I see or read and the conversations and struggles I have with others, God is there too. When I am afraid or when someone I care about is in trouble, God is there too whether I'm aware of God's presence or not. Learning how to talk with God, listen for God and discern God's presence is all part of growth in faith.

So what did I believe about God when I was a child? I remember some of the ideas I had. I thought God was all-loving because I was surrounded by love in my life. But I also believed God was all-powerful. This was very comforting on the most part. It meant that I could pray to God to protect me, to guide me and even to help me get things I wanted.

Did it work? Well, if you want to believe something you can interpret your life so that it fits into those beliefs. When things worked out well, it was credited to God. If things didn't work out well, it couldn't be God's fault. It had to be my fault in some way. Maybe I hadn't been praying or living well enough so that God was less inclined to answer my prayers. Maybe I was being judged somehow. Maybe the other person I was competing with was more righteous and God preferred to answer his prayer over mine. Do you see where I'm going here? God's answer to my prayers was dependent on whether I was faithful and good or not. God's love and care for me were conditional. My parents loved and supported me no matter what. But God?...

And you know, I think many people have that kind of faith even when they're adults. People who prosper, are successful, healthy and strong, such people can easily see God as a rewarder of their goodness and a blesser of their faithfulness. And according to this equation it's easy for those for whom life doesn't work out well to see God as their judge. To believe in God as all-powerful is to be forced to interpret everything that happens as somehow caused or permitted by God. But if we're honest about reality or sensitive to suffering and injustice in our world, this makes little sense. We have to ignore

a lot that is unfortunate or bad because it's hard to explain, and we have to really be self-righteous to imagine that God is controlling the whole universe in our favour because we are deserving in a way others are not.

Of course, when I was a child, I hadn't thought all that through. But there were little things along the way that disturbed my simple faith. Something had to change.

As I was growing up, I had interesting experiences with friends in the church and friends outside the church. Some tried to hold on to their childhood faith. This meant that they had to keep interpreting all that happened in the world and in their lives according to the simple formula of God all-powerful, God in charge and God in control. But what happened as they became aware of terrible atrocities in the world and terrible events and tragedies closer to their personal lives? Like the biblical Job's friends, all the bad had to be somebody's fault other than God's. God gave humans freedom to make choices and often they made bad choices with bad consequences. Or else, God was punishing people for something bad they had done at some point to deserve the bad that befell them. Salvation meant people had to repent of their sin and commit to trying to do better. If they did better, God would make things better for them.

But I also had friends who questioned such faith or gave up their faith altogether. What kind of God is so willful and arbitrary? Are the people to whom bad happens all so bad? And are those who seem to have such a blessed life so deserving of it? In fact, to be honest, too many good people suffer terrible things whereas too many bad people seem to live life on top of the world. Are all refugees around the world fleeing for their lives such terrible human beings? What about those who have fled their homes in BC because of fires or those killed in India because of flooding? Either God is an awful ruler of the universe, or else, God is a bad idea created by people desperate for some crutch for their anxiety and fear.

Well, this kind of questioning was the biggest kind of questioning pushing me to search for a more solid foundation for my faith. I want a faith that doesn't compromise being honest about reality. There is pain, suffering and loss, and whether it's deserved or not, it's awful and tragic. There is great injustice in the world. Bad is done and too often, there is no reckoning in this life as we know it. At the same time, though, I want to use words like God, salvation, faith, hope and love and have them mean something profoundly powerful. I feel something more and hunger for something more that gives purpose, meaning, inner strength and growth in my life. The search for transcendence is in me as much as honest questioning.

Can my faith hold both together and grow positively? Is it possible to live life honestly and truthfully, but also with a strong faith in God? I believe it is, and I believe most of you here believe it's possible as well. That's why you're here. You continue to search for ways to make your faith come alive again and again as you journey.

Well, let's search for some guidance through our scripture readings. Many people read the bible as if they can open up a passage or verse anywhere and get all the truth right there and then. This is the fundamentalist way. As Presbyterians, we take a different approach. We read the bible as a whole and interpret every passage and verse in the

context of the whole biblical story from Genesis to Revelation. So then, whether we read from the prophet Jeremiah or the words of Jesus as recorded in the gospels, we have to see it all as a journey. The people of God continued to develop their faith and their relationship with God over time, through their experiences, their relationships and their self-discovery.

So let's begin with Jeremiah. Jeremiah speaks truthfully, even if the truth doesn't fit some nice overall theory of faith. Jeremiah is full of anger. His anger is a righteous anger against the evil and injustice he witnesses all around him. But his anger also has hate in it. Isn't this the way it too often is with anger? Think about your own feelings. To rage against injustice is a good thing when it arises out of a sense of concern. We have to care to get angry. There is love in it. But anger easily turns hateful in our thoughts, our words and sometimes our actions.

Jeremiah questions God. 'Why, O God, does the way of the guilty prosper? Why do all who are treacherous thrive?' There are two kinds of people Jeremiah has a problem with. There are those who are hypocrites, who have God 'near their mouths yet far from their hearts.' And there are those who think they can do anything and get away with it because God is 'blind to our ways.'

And to make matters worse, such people are persecuting Jeremiah who is innocent. Therefore, his prayer is this: 'Pull them out like sheep for the slaughter, and set them apart for the day of slaughter.' In other words, Jeremiah wants a little justice. Justice for him here also means vengeance. If God acts against these treacherous folk, God will be vindicated and Jeremiah will be vindicated too. Jeremiah believes God can do this because God is in charge.

So, what's wrong with this picture? Many fundamentalist Christians will say there is nothing wrong here. God is in charge and God will eventually repay the wicked for their wickedness. God will vindicate Jeremiah and divine righteousness. But for those of us who look at Jeremiah's prophecy within a larger biblical story, we interpret Jeremiah, like Job, like the psalmists and like many prophets, struggling to make sense of reality. We treasure Jeremiah's honesty. Sometimes our prayers, too, are full of anger, frustration and a sense of incomprehension about why things have happened and are happening the way they are. This challenges us to think not only about reality, but about ourselves and about God. But do we stay in this state of anger and incomprehension, or, do other doors of meaning and transformation open up for us?

This brings us to our gospel reading. Jesus is challenging the more fundamentalist views of the disciples and the childish understanding of faith they have. The disciples want to prosper. They want greater power in their lives. They are following Jesus because they believe he will open the door to both. This is also why they are arguing as to who is the greatest. The greatest will also receive the greatest privilege and position with Jesus. A God in charge not only punishes the wicked. Such a God also rewards the righteous and blesses them in every tangible way. This is the prosperity gospel preached by many megachurches around the world.

But Jesus pours ice water over such ideas! He takes a child and brings her among them. He takes her into his arms. First of all, he says, my message is not about power over others to control their destinies, to punish or reward them according to whether they're on my side or not. My way is about service. My way is about living with each other recognizing our mutual vulnerability. Only as we face our vulnerability do we also open ourselves to living more sincerely, gently, generously, compassionately and with forgiveness and grace in our hearts. This means we have to let go wanting to be better than others. This means we have to let go our desire to control or punish others. This means we have to let go our hate, envy, judgementalism and selfish ambition. This is a journey of growth.

And you know, the people in power won't like it. They will reject me, torture me and kill me. I can see it. And if you follow me because I represent a higher way, you will be given a hard time too. But to grow in the way of a servant with servant love, you have to change your ideas about God in order to find the true God. You have to change your ideas about others and find better ways to relate. You have to change your ideas about yourselves and find a better inner person to love. Only then will you grow strong and free in the right ways.

Jesus doesn't quite say it like this, but this is in effect what he is saying. Jeremiah is honest. He gives voice to our own hearts and our own struggles. But Jesus reveals the kind of maturity of spirit into which we, like Jeremiah, need to grow. Jeremiah is like confession in worship and in our prayers. In order to grow we need to speak truthfully and sincerely before God about what is in our hearts, as ugly as it is. But in order to grow further, we need to focus on Jesus as he is given us in the gospels and in the New Testament. He gives us the purest vision of God and what God is calling us to be and do.

We live in a world where anything can happen. God doesn't micromanage or control it. But God wants to commune with us and out of such communion God wants to equip us to be servants of Christ, embodying his hands, feet and heart in the world. Healing and transformation come into our lives as we pray and work as servants of Christ, whatever our circumstances.

Let us pray: Make me a channel of your peace, O God, a channel of your love, your grace, your generosity, your forgiveness, your transformation.... Amen.