

Lent 3A 2023

“Where do you see yourself in five years?”

This is a common interview question that reflects the values of our culture.

I was surprised that I was even asked it as I discerned the call to ordination.

“Where do you see yourself in five years?”

It is a question that assumes that we are in charge, that we make our own destiny.

Imagine if someone had asked Moses, prince of Egypt, “Where do you see yourself in five years?”

I do not think he would have responded, “Well, wandering around the Sinai desert, and indeed, for several decades after that.”

If they had asked Saul, he might have said, “I see myself being promoted for my diligent persecution of followers of the way,” but then God thought, “Look at his passion.

I can use that to build my kingdom,” and blinded him and knocked him off his horse to send him on a more meaningful journey.

Theologically, it is an absurd question.

The only reasonable *Christian* answer is, “I will be where God leads me, a place that is yet to be revealed.”

Comfort with future uncertainty is a significant asset along the spiritual path.

The Hebrews wandering in the wilderness had not seen the promised land and did not know what to expect.

The path there was challenging, and rather than speak with God about those challenges, they doubted God and grumbled.

The Israelites could have told God, for example, that they were scared, that they were thirsty, that they needed God's support,

but instead of talking *to* God, they griped among themselves *about* God.

My spiritual director always asks, "And what did God say when you took this to God?"

Trusting God, you see, as in any relationship, means that we communicate.

It means having faith that God cares, being confident that God will hear us just as a parent listens to the requests of a child.

It does not mean that God will do everything we want or that everything will be easy.

Moses modeled faith in God for them.

He trusted God sufficiently to speak honestly with God, and that is what sets him apart from the other Hebrews.

When frustrated and angry and maybe a little scared, he cried out to the LORD: "What shall I do with this people? They are almost ready to stone me."

His consistent presence with God is likely why God chose him to be the leader, not because he was blameless before the law, not because he was patient, but because he opened his heart freely to God and trusted that he would be heard.

Even when he gets angry and breaks the tablets, the conversation continues and Moses comes down the mountain with his face shining.

He has had an honest talk with God.

The same is true of any relationship.

Those who communicate honestly and who listen sincerely to our responses are the one's who trust and who can be trusted.

We tend to stop trying to communicate when we believe we do not need others, that we can do it ourselves.

The Israelites believed they knew better than God, so they decided to make their own god in the shape of their own desires.

They knew where they should be in five years.

When circumstances force us to realize our dependence upon the living God, on the other hand, we change our approach.

I was reading an essay written by a Ukrainian soldier that could have been written during World War I.

He talked about the profound relationships with God in the trenches.

“An infantryman’s least favorite weather is a temperature of 35 degrees Fahrenheit and pouring rain, when the trench floods with knee-deep, near freezing water.

Surviving in such conditions is truly an art, and it’s at these moments in particular that a trench has a special energy. Here people fight for their lives, for every manifestation of it. Here communion with God is sincere and more frequent than in any church.”¹

The conditions compel the soldiers to trust their own perhaps latent sense that there is a God, and this fosters communication.

It is easier to ignore or deny our sense of God’s presence when things are going well.

As Paul writes, suffering can lead to an awareness of God’s love.

It “produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”

We learn, in other words, that whatever is happening to us, God is still with us, still loves us.

We may not like what is going on, but God has not abandoned us.

Our suffering is not without purpose.

1 <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/07/opinion/ukraine-war-trench-frontline.html?searchResultPosition=1>

The years the Israelites spent in the desert helped them to grow from being slave-minded (where one mutters quietly against and never trusts the authority) to freedom-minded so that they were able to build their own society.

Trust sometimes comes from unexpected quarters.

When Jesus boldly addresses the Samaritan woman at the well, she senses that he might be different.

She grows curious and tests her suspicions, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?”

“What’s up with you?”

Her response to Jesus’ openness allows him to engage compassionately with her, a woman, as he observes, who has been unlucky in love.

“You have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband.”

Perhaps through death or divorce, she has lost five husbands, each loss making it more difficult for her to get married again, and this in a world where women without a husband are at great social and economic disadvantage.

At this point, she has to rely upon a man who is not her husband, a man who, we presume, refuses to marry her.

It is the best she can do.

Most people would condemn her for her own misfortune.

It is perhaps the very challenges she has faced that make her open to trusting Jesus.

His compassionate response leads her to trust him more.

She begins to engage him in theological discussion, which turns into the longest recorded conversation that Jesus has with any individual.

As a result, the Samaritan woman becomes the first and perhaps the most effective evangelist, spreading the good news of God's love, something for which she has thirsted.

We cannot hope to build a loving relationship with God or with anyone else without communication, and that requires trust, or as we put it in theological terms, faith in God's love, which is essential to our well being.

When we lose sight of the fact that we rely on others and God for our well being, we forget the importance of trust and communication.

Now, today's collect of the day should make more sense.

"Almighty God, you know that we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves:

Keep us both outwardly in our bodies and inwardly in our souls, that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul."

A life fully lived is lived through God.

Who knows where God will lead us in five years?