

Sometimes Brilliant

Sermon by Tim Strommen on Isaiah 55:1-13 Dec. 17, 2017

Recently I read a really good book, "Sometimes Brilliant", by Larry Brilliant. Growing up in the 60s he was a hippie, a true hippie of the 60s, from California. He became a doctor, went to India and ended up living in a gathered community of a holy man, a Maharaji. You can't help but like him, he was a spiritual seeker, had a heart for helping people. And then his life took a huge turn, and the urging of this manharaji, "your destiny is to end smallpox".

In a few years he ended up on the front lines, in India in 1975, working with the UN on trying to eradicate smallpox. At that time there were only four countries left that had smallpox, all around India, and it was seen as impossible to eradicate it in India. But his story is, that he did it. It is a true story. It is an incredible story, and book. One thing that stuck with me, is that he had some very interesting discussions with religious people, buddhists, Hindus, even a Lutheran Pastor, who he worked with, for along the way he was seeing so much suffering, there were times when he would despair and ask religious people: "how does God relate to suffering", does God cause it, allow it to happen, powerless to stop it? How do you worship such a God? How do you explain it?

Don't Try To Understand God

One Holy man told him, "don't try to understand God, just try to see God in everyone you meet." Actually, that is not a bad way to live. Because who can understand the Creator of the Universe. And some of the verses today seem to suggest exactly that:

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"For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways,"

declares the Lord.

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"As the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

So, why even try, who are we that we can try to know the mind of God. Of course, there seem to be people who profess to know the mind of God, the exact meaning of why a hurricane came, or why a tragedy struck, or even why a gunman shows up at a church and kills 26 people. And these same people seem to know exactly who is going to hell, and who are God's special people. Really? Yet, it isn't

helpful to decide that we can't know anything about God, for if we try to see God in everyone we meet, what do we look for?

But Who Is God?

Yet, there is a difference between claiming to know the mind of God, and trying to have a good grasp of who God is. **Especially** since the biblical witness is that God wishes a relationship with us, and has revealed things. The Bible, written of course by people, Jewish prophets, priests, and poets, felt that they were encountered by God. They felt that they had become involved with a God who chose them, who at times had spoken to them, revealed himself to them. Not an emotionless God, not an apathetic God, not a trickster vengeful god, but a God who loved them, had a vision for them, wanting for them to be blessed. And to be a blessing to others. There was an unfolding experience of the divine going on as a people and they wished to reflect on it.

After these words of "my thoughts are higher than your thoughts", the Isaiah passage reads: Gods says:

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As the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return to it without watering the earth
and making it bud and flourish,
so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,

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so is my word that goes out from my mouth:
It will not return to me empty,
but will accomplish what I desire
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

God is a God with purpose and Desire

This is interesting, after saying, "hold on people, my thoughts and plans are way above you", then God reveals something about his thoughts and plans - Rain water doesn't just fall to earth and do nothing. It makes things grow. God is saying - my Word, My Will, My Purpose, that goes from me (mouth?) doesn't just go to the earth, into the world of people, **and do nothing!** It doesn't just go to the earth and accomplish nothing. It has a purpose, and it achieves that purpose. Here is a God who truly has a passion for this world, for people. Saying he will be active in the world - with results!

We are near Christmas, the time when we celebrate Jesus' birth, and we hold to the words from John's Gospel, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . .and the Word became flesh". We hold dear that Jesus came to earth, AS THE WORD OF GOD, not for nothing, but to accomplish, to achieve a purpose, and as God says, "it will not return to me empty". God was involved, as a God who wills to be connected to the world, to us.

And so what does God wish to accomplish?

Mukhlaed

I have gotten to know an Iraqi family in our area, met Mukhlaed and his family, at Anoka Food shelf. He had fled Baghdad for his life, went to turkey, his wife and two small girls joined him, he came to the US as a refugee in fall of 2016. Our family, my grandkids, have gotten together with them several times. Invited them to join us for 4th of July, and he has invited us to his home for a meal. Last week he called me and invited Dawn and me to his home Thanksgiving. I have a family of three children and spouses, and 7 grandchildren. Of course we already have our annual family Thanksgiving plans set. I told him thank you, but we already have plans.

We ended the call, and then I started to become conflicted inside. In fact downright emotional. I know that he doesn't have any family here, and that he was reaching out to friendship and community. But there was another reason that I was getting emotional inside. I had had a dream that night, but it wasn't really a dream because I could remember no situation, no people, not anything about the dream that was a dream. Actually, it was only a phrase that seemed to be poured into me, not a phrase that I would ever have come up with myself. It was: "I will be a point of grace". I remember it seemed for hours in the early morning that I was, half asleep, trying to figure out that phrase. I thought someone was saying it, like Jesus. But like most dreams, I woke up and forgot about it. But then after the phone call, it came back, and when I said it out loud, the "I" in the phrase became me. "I will be a point of grace". (say it, it now seems like a commitment). Of course I immediately knew that I needed to invite them to join us for Thanksgiving. Which I did. I checked with family. Everyone was onboard. And we had a good time.

Now, I know many people invite lonely people and strangers every year to be with them for Thanksgiving, and some serve the homeless meals every year. My story is not unusual - but I guess for me, I took it as important. I am not mystical person. Much of my faith seems to be lived out in my head, in ideas, and this world to me most of the time doesn't seem very spiritual, or supernatural. But I liked what happened because it affirmed to me that life is more than what you see. Life is deeply mysterious, to be sure, and some of that mystery is spiritual, and involves a movement of love, a touch grace, a Call from God. I felt it in my heart. A pushing to grow in love and response to others.

Considering this Isaiah passage, these are some things I get out of it:

1) There is a passionate determination about God here, that I find comforting. “His action towards us, like the rain’s growing and blossoming effect on the earth, God states, “it will not return to me empty”. “It will accomplish what I desire”. If we take this personally, which I think we should, I hear this as God’s commitment to us: “I will make your lives worthwhile, meaningful.” **I hear this as Grace.** Because we know our lives are filled with stops and starts, imperfections, lack of courage, sometimes not brilliant actions at all. But in these words I hear God saying, “I am with you. Your life will not be empty, nor return to me empty!” God wants to wrap us up in His purpose.

2) If we we ask the question, “So, if God wants to accomplish a purpose in us, what IS GODS’S PURPOSE?”

I wish to go back to something quite simple that for me says it all. Jesus spoke about God, “Be compassionate, as I am compassionate”. And so there are two parts to this purpose - First, God coming to earth like rain, and showing that God is compassionate. And God certainly did this through Jesus Christ. Through the life, the teachings of Jesus, the Death and Resurrection of Jesus - this part of God’s purpose is shown - “I am compassionate” towards you. Abundant forgiveness, love. This is who I AM. The Holy One of Israel, the Holy God of Creation. A compassionate God!

But secondly, God’s purpose is showing us, helping us, inspiring our lives to be compassionate as well. It just seems that throughout the Bible, the big verses, the big passages that stand out to me - say this:

“And God has shown you what is good: Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God”

“Forgive, as you have been forgiven”

“I was hungry, I was thirsty, I was naked, I was a stranger, I was in prison . . . and you gave me food, water, clothing, welcome . . . If you do unto the least of these, you have done it to me” (those verses, totally recognizing Jesus in others)

“Love one another, as I have loved you”

God wishes that our lives be compassionate, and not that it is just up to us so we better get going. God seems very determined to help us.

Paul in Acts spoke some very beautiful words: ***For in God we live and move and have our being.***’ as people, as individuals, as a church - let us get caught up in the purpose of God. Let’s let our lives get wrapped up in God’s determination, and grace filled energy, as we live and move and have our being, let us know that God, like rain that falls to the earth, is working in and through our lives to fulfill his purposes.

And that doesn’t mean that our lives will all be worthy of a best selling book to be written. But that we allow God’s love and grace to shine through our lives. When we allow ourselves to be “points of grace”,

and bless others, it returns to God not empty, but fulfilled. And God promises that when our lives return to Him, it is accomplished, God's purpose, our lives.