

February 21, 2016
The Second Sunday in Lent
The Rev. Tom E. King

Those of us who have spent a lot of time in church are familiar with religious and theological language. Folks outside the church do not find our language very helpful, especially if they are prone to take it literally.

From time to time it is helpful to listen to the language of spiritually-minded people outside our customary vocabulary to see how they talk about things that we consider essential.

Some time ago ran across such a description of the spiritual life in a wonderful book, an autobiography by Jane Goodall. Most of you know that Jane Goodall is an anthropologist who devoted her entire professional career studying the chimpanzees and gorillas of eastern Africa. Goodall's book is entitled Reason for Hope: A Spiritual Journey.

Like most people, Goodall's life had its ups and downs. About 2/3 of the way through the book she describes a powerful spiritual experience. Her husband whom she loved dearly had died a slow and agonizing death. She was grieving deeply. Her son had recently taken his own life. She was grieving deeply. The rain forests and natural habitats for Africa's animals were disappearing by hundreds of acres each day. She was grieving deeply.

Early one morning she climbed the steep hills of Gombe to seek solace among the apes, the trees, and the sunrise. Like Abram in the reading from Genesis, life was not going the way she had planned. Not going the way she had hoped. Like Abram she was keenly aware of all she had lost, of all that was missing from her life. She wondered how the future would be since the building blocks were no longer there.

As she sat in the mist and watched the sun rise, she began to experience a powerful comfort and reassurance in her grief. She knew at the core of her being that God was love...that she was loved by this God of love...that her security did not lie in tangibles or in people. Her security did not lie in strength. Her security did not lie in resources available and visible at the moment.

It became clear to her that her security lay in trust, in faith, in surrender to the power of the universe and the One who was its source.

The message of Jane Goodall's vision was much like the message of Abram's vision: Things were going poorly at the moment. He was wondering if his faith in God had been misplaced. He was wondering whether he had been naïve to believe God would be with him.

The reply, the message, from deep within Abram was remarkably clear for Abram as it was for Jane Goodall:

There is more to your life than you can see from here. There is more to your story than you could ever imagine. You are part of God's story: a story that began long, long ago ---- a story that will continue long after your days on earth are over.

Your faith is not in vain. Your work is not in vain. Your life is not in vain. It became clear to Abram and to Jane Goodall that their vision, their clarity, was more than words could describe. In the midst of grief and confusion and doubt, something breathed hope into their hearts and minds. A quiet assurance came over them, an assurance that they are God's children, that God cannot take their struggles away – but will not leave them to struggle alone.

After reading Jane Goodall's experience and reading again the experience of Abram in the book of Genesis, I began to see that their stories are quite similar to our stories:

★ We all experience 10,000 joys and 10,000 sorrows, as the Buddha said, no matter who we are, and no matter how many resources we have at our disposal.

★ We would like to rely more on certainty and clarity, and less on faith.

★ Like Jesus said, we are prone to focus on things that matter very little and overlook things that matter a great deal.

★ We are so caught up in our own work, our own life, that we lose sight of our connection with others. We lose sight of the larger picture.

★ We operate under the illusion that we are in control, that we are in charge of our lives. Certainly our decisions are crucial to our future and security; but when all is said and done, we are more vulnerable to the winds of life than we like to admit.

★ We overestimate the importance of our own opinions and attitude, and we assume those who disagree with us just don't know any better.

It seems to me that we can take away from the story of Jane Goodall and the story of Abram two things:

★ They discovered the nurturing spirit of God in the midst of grief, confusion, doubt, and uncertainty. The Buddhists say that one who is able to keep a beginner's mind on the spiritual journey has lots of room for new discoveries. One who considers himself or herself an expert has no such room: their cup is already full.

Both Jane Goodall and Abram had their backs to the wall. They were confused, lost, wondering if they had been wrong about God and faith. Their minds and hearts were open, they had a beginner's mind and a beginner's heart. They had no other choice. Life had turned their cup over and now they had room to hold something new.

★ These moments of reassurance, these moments of comfort and confidence, were the exception, not the norm. They were life-changing, and neither of them ever forgot these moments of clarity. But there were times when the clarity was a distant memory rather than an immediate resource. However, because they were willing to hear and to trust in those exceptional moments, their lives were changed forever.

You and I may be in the same boat as Jane Goodall and Abram: we may find that our expectations get in the way. We may discover that our ideas about how things should be are a hindrance to seeing how things really are. We may discover that God loves us more than we could ever imagine: At times it may feel like a parent taking us by the hand on a dark road; but more often it is likely to be a still, small voice, a breath of fresh air, the recognition that God cannot take away our struggles, that God cannot take away our fears, that God cannot take away our grief. And, yet, in the midst of those struggles, fears, and grief, God sustains us and assures us that we do not face the 10,000 joys or the 10,000 sorrows all alone.

Lent 2 C, 2016

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