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David L. Edwards

God Never Gives Up

Ps. 14 *Fools say in their hearts, "There is no God."...Have they no knowledge, all the evildoers who eat up my people as they eat bread, and do not call upon the Lord?*

Jeremiah 4:11-12,22-28 *I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void...I looked, and lo, there was no one at all, and the birds of the air had fled.*

1 Timothy 1:12-17 *...I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence. But I received mercy because I had acted in unbelief....*

Luke 15:1-10 *And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them."*

There are weeks when the lectionary readings provide such a feast that it is difficult to decide which to focus on. That is why we read together in our "Litany of Scripture" central portions of the first three readings and also heard the whole of the Gospel reading. I want to explore some points of meditation out of these readings. Also I want to touch a thread of meaning that runs through them all, something that speaks to us today as a covenant community seeking to live out the love of God in a nation and world where so much is contrary to God's desires for us and the world. The situation can become overwhelming. But if we face it squarely, we find that it is precisely within the challenges and seemingly hopeless situations that God's light of grace and new life comes.

Psalm 14 begins: "Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God.'" Then the psalmist goes on to paint a bleak picture. From God's perspective, there is not a single human being who knows how to do good or even seeks to connect with God in prayer so that the good can be discovered. Those who live without reference to God are devastating the poor. They "gobble them up like bread," using people for their own gain.

Poverty is growing in our nation. People are "gobbled up" every day in the "down-sizing" of companies for the sake of the bottom line, while CEOs pull in unconscionable salaries. Inner city schools go without teachers and textbooks. The Federal "Leave No Child Behind" Act, its title blatantly stolen from the Children's Defense Fund but without the moral content, doesn't touch the core problems of inequality, poverty, and injustice. We are devoting nearly \$500 billion in the military budget while

aid to those who are truly in need in our society is being constantly cut and made more difficult to receive. Out of the sixteen most developed countries in the world, the U.S. is dead last in giving for international aid. ["On Global Violence and U.S. Foreign Policy," The Other Side, September and October 2004]

The psalm speaks of those who say there is no God. We hear God's name spoken all the time over our wars and politicians. The psalmist isn't concerned about the intellectual denial of God's existence. The psalmist is concerned about practical atheism—living in ways that harm people and the creation, ways of living that deny God's sovereignty over the life God created, whether we invoke God's name or not.

The words of Jeremiah continue in this vein. Jeremiah is living in the years just prior to Israel's Exile into Babylon. The storm is approaching and cannot be avoided. Jeremiah's words call the people to see the coming destruction as rooted in their own actions, their abandoning of the purposes of God for life. Violence. Greed. Selfishness. Neglect and oppression of the poor and others in need. Scripture speaks of God's "wrath" and "judgment." We don't like those words. They sound harsh and seem to belie the God of love. But perhaps we can find meaning in them. Our actions have consequences. A part of life is accepting and learning from those consequences in order to live in better ways. In parenting we call it "natural consequences," letting children learn how to deal with the results of their behaviors. I think this is also true in the spiritual sense. When we live in ways that run counter to the ways God means for us to live, we experience the consequences. In the prophetic sense, things happen for a reason and we can face those things and learn from them, changing the ways we live.

Jeremiah also sees a bleak picture. The earth is waste and void. There is no light in the sky. Everyone is gone. The skies are empty of birds. A once-fruitful land is now a wasteland. The scriptures confirm what we have been learning from science itself: the whole creation is intricately bound together, interdependent. We humans are a part of that fabric. And when we live the way we have been living, selfishly and without consideration for our very home and its future, then the whole creation suffers. The creation is not the problem. We humans are, and the biblical story can be read as the story of God's calling us into our true and right place within the creation.

The Tao te Ching, was written in the 6th century B.C.E. It is an important piece of human spirituality. In it there is a passage that sounds remarkably like Jeremiah's message:

When humanity interferes with the Tao,
the sky becomes filthy,
the earth becomes depleted,

the equilibrium crumbles,
creatures become extinct. [#39]

If we think of the “Tao” as the way of life or the wisdom of life itself, it is similar to what our tradition calls God’s “Word,” the *dabar* in Hebrew, the *logos* in Greek. It is the energy of God, the dynamic will of God for life to which we are to listen and with which we are to live in harmony. When we are not living in harmony with God and the whole of creation, then we bring destruction on the creation, including ourselves.

Injustice toward human beings also effects the earth itself. Exploitation of people and exploitation of the earth—they are bound together in the same “practical atheism” in which our leadership, our corporations, and we ourselves are engaging. It’s not enough to point the finger at those who are to blame. We are all in it together. And we must all change to avoid the catastrophic damage to the earth, thus to ourselves, that we are creating. To continue to deny the irreversible damage we have already done is to seal our fate and the fate of our children.

That’s the “bad news.” But we need the “bad news.” If we live in denial of things that need changing, things that are going wrong, we will never be able to correct them, to make things better. Even “bad news” is part of the “good news” that we long to hear. Otherwise the “good news” is only illusion and has nothing to do with reality.

Now consider Paul. Paul became a changed man. He writes to the young Timothy that the core of his new life is God’s unbounded and incomprehensible mercy and compassion and patience. How does he know about that? Because he has experienced it in his own life. He was living in ways exactly counter to God’s will for life. Furthermore, he was doing it as a zealous, committed religious person. He was a premier “practical atheist.” He was trying to stamp out the perceived threat of this little Jesus movement within Judaism. He was defending religion, orthodoxy, the power structures.

Then Paul was met by the living Christ. And that encounter called him into a whole new life. He was a man of violence; now he is a man of the gospel of God’s love in Christ. He points to himself as evidence of just how deep and radical the grace of God is. He was the worst of offenders, the chief sinner, an enemy of God. Now he has become the bearer of the message of God’s love to the wider world and he is pouring out his life trying to help the new churches be those new communities for the sake of the whole world. Paul is one big “flip-flopper”! And he calls on everyone to be a flip-flopper, persons humble enough to receive God’s grace and love, persons called by that very love to give themselves in their various gifts and callings to the service of life, the life God has made. Paul wants us all to experience the joy and power of saying: “Look, this is what God’s love did for me. And if God can love me, God can love anyone!”

Now we are hearing the good news. It has to do with the call to change, to repent. Repentance is a wonderful word. Too bad it has been misused to conjure up all sorts of agonizing and unpleasant images. The word *metanoio* means to turn around, to be transformed, to change our minds, to go in a different direction. At no point in our lives as individuals, as communities of faith, or as a human family are we doomed to stay in the destructive ruts we have made for ourselves. Every moment is a moment of change, of getting back in touch with God’s gracious love and letting our lives be redirected in fruitful and life-giving ways. And Paul is a wonderful example of how important our own small lives are in the bigger picture of the world. Change in us effects changes around us. There is nothing more important for the world than the work we do with our own lives, than the journey of our own transformation in and by the love of God.

Finally, Jesus’ parables of the lost sheep and coin. The Pharisees and scribes are critical of Jesus for hanging out with sinners, those labeled by acceptable society and religion as outsiders. Again, the defense of the *status quo*, of the structures that oppress and divide. So Jesus tells these little stories. The shepherd who personally goes out and searches for the lost sheep until it is found, throws it over his shoulders and brings it home. The woman who turns the house upside down until she finds the one lost coin. And when the one is found the many rejoice, including God.

That’s God’s nature. God never gives up on us, on the world. The most frequent description of God in the Hebrew Scriptures is “steadfast love”(*hesed*). God never gives up but always seeks us, always offers new life, always embraces us. God doesn’t call us to stand apart like the Pharisees and point fingers. God calls us to be part of God’s searching, seeking love. And it begins with our own lives, experiencing and receiving that love for us, as unworthy or broken or weak as we may feel ourselves to be.

The psalmist and Jeremiah help us by encouraging us to look squarely at reality, at those things we don’t want to see or feel too powerless to do anything about. Paul and Jesus help us to touch the God who never gives up on us, who calls and empowers us to change, and who keeps looking for the lost until the lost is found and brought safely home. As bleak as the picture may be, we can face it. We can face it because of God’s infinite, gracious, and determined love for us and the world, a love that never gives up on us or the world, a love that embraces us with divine patience so that each of us and we together become centers of a new creation.