

Sermon for Sunday, January 26, 2014 Epiphany 3/Holy Baptism Isaiah 9:1-4, Matthew 4:12-23 "God of Possibilities"

Our God is a God of possibilities. That is a fact as true as the sun will rise in the morning, and that the grass will grow in the spring, and that the children who are in the nursery and in Sunday School will be a couple of inches taller by September.

Our God is a God of possibilities.

We forget that on a frequent basis. We somehow get locked into the notion that God went about creating the world, got things rolling by winding it all up like some cosmic watchmaker, and then turned away, letting the tick-tock of the cosmic clock progress.

We think that God is somewhere out there, not here, a distant and disengaged transcendent being who is too big to relate to us, to know us, to care about us.

Alternatively, we might think that God stopped interacting with us when God's only Son, Jesus Christ, took on human form and lived among us. He lived among us, at least until his message was too threatening to the earthly powers. Two thousand years ago. A long, long time ago.

There's a certain safety in thinking of God that way. When we do, we can compartmentalize God into that One we deal with on Sunday mornings, and thus not feel the weight of God's expectations of us as we move about our daily work and play. It isn't Sunday, so God must not be watching, so what does it matter how we live our lives?

But the downside of such thinking is that we then deny God the opportunity to be the God of possibilities, the God who continues to act in the world in sometimes very surprising ways even now. We think that all that needs to change relies on us and our actions only, without seeing God's hand at work in very real ways.

Now, I'm not calling for any of you to get up and testify to God's working your lives, although that might be an interesting exercise. I know that you know the moments when you felt God, or sensed you felt God, close to you and affecting you in some way.

And that is a good thing, because God does continue to work in the world, and to work in you.

I give you as Exhibit A our Old Testament reading this morning. We are continuing to hear from the prophet Isaiah. This is an early piece of his book. He announces the coming of a king to bring light to the God's people, at that time struggling in the midst of political battles around them and the internal strife and power plays between the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. They are a people exhausted, torn, feeling like they have made all the wrong moves, wondering if they will ever have a sense of lightness, of joy, of peace and – dare they dream it? – prosperity..

...and Isaiah gives them God's word, the word that promises a change in the climate. For those who were mired in darkness, there is light coming. For those who were bowed by the yoke of oppression, that yoke will be broken and they will be able to arise again.

These are not the words of a distant watchmaker God. These are not the words of a divine Creator who sits back and watches and lets us do eternal damage to ourselves...this is the One who promises, who lays out the possibilities of what is to come. These are the words of a God who sees, who cares, and who acts.

Now what happens when we who are Christians hear this passage? We, not surprisingly, take it as a predictor of Jesus Christ. All our imagery of Christmas and Epiphany, that time of the coming of the light of the world, reminds us of this passage from Isaiah.

And just in case we forget how Christianity has embraced Isaiah's message as the announcement of the Christ, I give you Exhibit B. Jesus himself, in Matthew's Gospel, directly quotes from Isaiah, good Jewish rabbi that he is. "Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles-- the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned."

Now his purpose is a little different from Isaiah's might have been. Isaiah is all about telling an oppressed people that God has heard them and will bring relief.

Jesus is all about telling an oppressed people – those first century Jews who were under incredible strain from the Roman Empire – that God has heard them and will bring relief...but wait! There's more!

Jesus says it is coming soon, and they had best get themselves ready, get their houses and their hearts in order, because the time is almost here.

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. The God of possibilities is in action mode, not distant, not just watching, but acting...

...and you say, well, gee whiz, that was 2000 years ago. Yeah, Jesus came and all that, but we killed him and then he went to heaven, and what does that have to do with the broken screen on my iPhone and the fact that my company is downsizing and I might lose my job?

But our God is a God of possibilities. Consider that the broken iPhone that you can't afford to fix has become a crutch causing you to avoid interacting with your spouse or your parents, and that maybe this is the opportunity to reconnect and discover you really like these people and want to talk to them. Consider that the job might or might not go away, that you might keep your job or find something better, or that there is something else that will unfold, some other possibility that you haven't imagined yet. Do I think that God broke the screen just to get you to talk to your parents? Probably not, but you never know. Do I think that God is going to take your job away so you might have another possibility? It's a long shot, but it might be so. God is, after all, a God of possibilities, and all of God's creativity is invested in seeing those possibilities unfold.

Consider the possibilities...

That's a particularly apt thing to focus on this morning as we prepare to baptize Julia Rose. She is possibility personified...all babies are, aren't they? We have hopes and dreams for them. God has hopes and dreams for babies, too, and lays out myriad possible ways that her life might unfold.

If the only possibilities before Julia Rose were the ones we human beings came up with, we might limit her unduly. But God, the God of possibilities, has an infinitely more creative imagination than any of us do. Who knows what lies ahead for her? Only one, her Creator, and God will serve as her guide as the possibilities unfold.

And that is why we come here today to offer her to God, to ask that God enfold her in a divine embrace, to name her as one of God's own, now and forever.

Because we don't want to rely on our skills alone in letting Julia Rose discover the possibilities that await her, and the pitfalls along the way. We want to bring a whole community of those who recognize that they are God's children to share in the journey, and to assist. We want to ask for God's love and care for her, and for all children whom God has given us.

We want to ask God to show her all the possibilities and to prod her and hug her and whisper in her ear when she goes off-course. We want a God who is not a distant and disinterested creator to aid us in caring for her. We want a God who watches, who cares, who acts.

The God of possibilities awaits her, as is true for all of us. Let us commit ourselves to God, as we commit Julia Rose to God, this day, and let the possibilities unfold!

Amen.