

“The totally other but always present God”

October 16, 2011

Text: Isaiah 45:1-7, 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10

I.

Coming home from church one day, a little boy has questions about God. **Mom**, he asks, **is God everywhere? I heard that at church today.**

Yes, she replies, God is everywhere.

Well, then, is God in our house? *Yes, God is in our house.*

And is God in this very room? *Yes, God is in this room.*

Is God in this jar, he asks? *Yes, God is in the jar.*

Whereupon the little boy places his hands over the top of the jar and says, **I gotch ya, God. Gotch ya right here.**

How we think about God is important. It’s important because it has to do with how we think about ourselves and others ... and certainly with the way we treat others.

II.

Our reading this morning from **Isaiah 45** is a powerful theological reading. It challenges many of our assumptions about God—the way we think about God. About how God views *the human situation*, how God understands the inter-relationship of nations and religions.

If you look at the Bible as God’s unfolding story of salvation, the Bible is, indeed, a remarkable story. And one of the things we learn early on is that ...

- We can’t domesticate God. We can’t tame God.
- We can’t mold God into an image of us.
- We can’t assign God to some theology we have all neatly worked out.
- Whatever our theology—our way of thinking about God—God is always more.

Just when we think we’ve got God all understood, to the point where we have a comfort level we can manage, **Isaiah 45** comes along and knocks us totally off balance.

In **Isaiah 45**, without any discussion or forewarning, God claims **Cyrus of Persia**, the King of Persia, the emperor who has defeated the Babylonians and is now the de facto

ruler of the world; God claims him as God's *anointed one*, to help in the realization of God's purposes.

In many ways, this is a radical declaration God is making. Cyrus is a foreigner, a non-Jew. However, he was apparently an unusually gifted leader. He was a progressive who promoted tolerance and understanding.

With all the nations Cyrus has conquered, he encourages *local cultural and religious autonomy* where people could practice their own culture and follow their own religion.

And, GET THIS (this is what's really radical in all of this): Cyrus has no awareness of the God of Israel, no sense that God would be using him in this way. Cyrus doesn't know God, but God knows Cyrus.

This is the only instance in the Bible where a foreigner enjoys the status of *God's own anointed*. **Isaiah 45** is a continual reminder of God as *totally other*, as One whose actions we can never totally predict, much less comprehend.

III.

Imagine the idea of a foreign King who has never heard of Israel's God becoming God's instrument for justice and peace in the world! Imagine how that must have sounded to Second Isaiah's audience!

How can one who is not *like us*, not *one of us*, be trusted to help us? If we were Israel, would we trust this? Would we buy this?

In today's world, if we were told that some Iranian or Russian or Chinese were going to be doing things in the world that would bring about our salvation, would we trust that? Certainly not easily.

We're reminded that God works in ways beyond our comprehension. This is the *totally other* aspect of God—God who is always more than we can fathom or imagine.

This *totally other* God is revealed in **Isaiah 55:8-9**, one of my favorite readings in all of scripture:

1. *For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.*
2. *For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

As we allow the implications of this reading from **Isaiah 45** to sink in, it reminds us that ... *we should never—in our own mind—limit how and where God might be working.*

We should certainly never be deluded into thinking that God is working only for our cause and our purposes ... or for our country and our religion ...

If we think about the implications of **Isaiah 45**, *where could God NOT be working on this planet, or in the universe?* We can't limit God. What do we know? And however much we know, we still have such limited perspective.

IV.

Biblical scholar, **Jay Emerson Johnson** says: *What we cannot now perceive as in any way divine might just belong to the providential plan that leads to our salvation.*

That's an eye-opening prospect. The point is—again—we don't know.

- How could God NOT be a force for good—everywhere?
- Seeking to make things better—everywhere?
- How could God NOT be a reconciling presence—everywhere?
- That's what God does.

God IS this utter mystery—*totally other*—working through all people, all religions, in all places. And yet, God is also *always present*, never NOT with us, never NOT working in human hearts around the world.

We sense this *always present* God in the reading I shared from **1 Thessalonians**. In the first words of the letter, we can sense it. CHECK IT OUT: *to the church of the Thessalonians IN God*. Talk about being *always present*; Paul refers to the Thessalonian church as being *IN God*.

This was the Apostle Paul's first letter which he wrote, probably around 50 Common Era. We can sense Christ's presence, along with the prospect of his imminent return.

As Paul notes, the Thessalonians have the sense that God has chosen them: *For we know, brothers and sisters, that God has chosen you.*

But this *choosing* was through the preaching of the gospel by Paul and others. In other words, it was very personal ... and God was very present—*the totally other and always present God.*

I love that title, because God is like that: *totally other*—mysterious, full of surprises—more than we can every fathom or imagine; and at the same time, *always present*—present in word and spirit.

To understand God as *totally other* is humbling; it helps put our lives in perspective and to remember that it's a big world out there and that God is the God of every human being.

To accept God as *always present* is to place our trust in the fundamental goodness of life. We KNOW God's presence in our love and in our compassion which we practice on a daily basis.

People approach me all the time asking about how to restore their faith, how to get their faith back. For whatever reasons, they feel out of touch, that something is missing in their lives ... and they wonder, indeed, how can they *get their faith back*?

My response is always the same: it's a matter of doing it ... of practicing the presence of God. Of making good choices—however small—every moment through out the day, week after week, month after month. It's a matter of *choosing* to act with kindness, compassion, forgiveness and generosity. All these into one: that's what love is.

V.

Leonardo Boff, the *liberation* theologian from Brasil, was at a conference one time with the **Dalai Lama** and during a casual moment, he asked him: *What is the best religion?*

I think Boff thought he would respond *Tibetan Buddhism* or one of the older oriental religions. But, after a brief pause, the Dalai Lama's response was:

The best religion is the one that gets us closest to God. It's the one that makes us a better person.

And what is it that makes me better, Boff asked?

It is whatever makes you more compassionate, more sensible, more detached from stuff, more loving and kind, more humanitarian, more responsible, more ethical ...

And the Dalai Lama went on: *I'm not so much interested in your religion. What's important to me is your behavior with your peers, your family, your work, your community and the world. Remember, the universe in an echo of our actions.*

And then he said something very wise: *The law of physics, of action and reaction, is also true of human relations. If I act with goodness, I receive goodness. If I act with evil, I get evil in return.*

What our grandparents told us is true; you will always have what you desire for others. Happiness is not about destiny or luck; it's about making good choices.

Finally, he said,

Take care of your thoughts because they become your words.

Take care of your words because they become your actions.

Take care of your actions because they become your habits.

*Take care of your habits because they become your character.
Take care of your character because it will define your truth.
And there is no religion higher than the truth.*

VI.

How we think about God—as *totally other* and as *always present*—is reflected in the choices we make.

1. The *totally other* God invites us to a larger world—a world where all people are welcomed and valued.
2. The *always present God* becomes such a part of our lives in our daily prayer life and acts of meditation that we want and choose to reflect God in all that we do.

And when we live our lives in this way, the word of God sounds forth—in us and through us—and all the world is drawn closer to God’s salvation.

All praise be unto God! Amen!

Dr. Jeffrey E. Frantz
Miami Lakes Congregational Church, *United Church of Christ*
6701 Miami Lakeway South
Miami Lakes, FL 33014
On the web at www.mlchurch.com