

It's in the Details

Sixth Sunday of Easter

May 5, 2013

Jill R. Russell

Texts: Acts 16.9-15;
Psalm 67;
Revelation 21.22-22.5;
John 14.23-29

Two weeks ago on our celebration of earth day, I encouraged those of us gathered here that day to get outside. I made that claim that time the natural world is a uniquely spiritual place where our souls can be restored and where we can learn more about who God is and what it means to be fully human. I like to take personal responsibility for the turn toward warmer weather that occurred just around that same time. It was either our earth day celebration or the fact that my family finally took down our snowflakes from the porch window and put flowers up instead - one or the other. The last week in particular has given us a front row seat to the spectacular glory and beauty of creation – hasn't? And just in time for Fiesta and Tulip Time, too. As the weather moves us outside and as our city's festivals bring us together, our texts for this Sunday invite us to continue this inquiry into where we find God and how we respond to God in our life of faith.

One question that has been going through my mind as I read these texts today: Is God found in uniquely spiritual places? Like a sanctuary of some kind whether that sanctuary is a church or temple any place set aside for the purpose of worship. Or even the idea of creation itself as a sanctuary as I claimed two weeks ago. We all know people who claim that their sanctuary is found in nature and that God comes alive for them when they are in the beauty of creation far away from the chaos and complexity of city life or human community. I have a dear friend who most definitely finds God in the sanctuary of creation away from people surrounded by the quiet and beauty of nature. She was horrified when I once pointed out to her that the metaphor in Revelation for the new heaven and new earth was not a return to Eden and the idyllic garden but the image of a bustling city full of people. She wasn't so sure she wanted any part of that.

What strikes me most in this vision from Revelation is the claim that there is no temple in this city. No sanctuary and no special place set aside for worship. The reason is because the temple is the Lord God and as we heard last week the home of God in this vision is among mortals. Jesus says this very same thing in the gospel today to his disciples: "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come and make our home with them."

Where do we find God? According to these texts, we find God right in the middle of life: in the heart of the city as well as in the peace of the countryside, in the chaos of human complexity, in the decisions we make, in the work that we do, and in the relationships we share. I was reading a meditation by someone reflecting on this passage from Revelation in which the author referred to the epic poem by Dante called the *Divine Comedy*. The author was remembering a scene from the poem and he wrote that “Dante comes at last to a stadium like structure which is called the Rose, where the saints are seated together and never take their eyes off the God who is present, for in looking at God they are also truly looking at each other.”¹

Both the vision from Revelation and this poem by Dante are looking at the end of time; what it will be like when creation is restored and God’s realm is fully known. After all that is what a vision does. It invites you to see what life *could* be like maybe even what life *should* be like. It’s easy to write these kinds of visions off as fantasy and speculation or a distraction for the real world. But the purpose of this kind of literature in the early church was to encourage the church of that day in their real time struggles to be faithful. Gordon touched on this last week. What is envisioned as life with God at the end of time gives us an important vision for our life with God today.

According to this vision, God is to be found in the middle of life. That’s a challenging vision. If you look around in the middle of life sometimes God can feel so far away. I talked to someone who is struggling to make ends meet; working night and day and still don’t have enough money to pay the bills, feed the kids, or keep gas in the car. All it takes is an accident or an illness and they will be completely wiped out. Where is God in that never-ending cycle of anxiety and fear and exhaustion?

I watch as an older person feels the walls closing in as their life gets smaller and smaller and smaller. Each change in their health brings a new restriction a new level of loss. Where is God in the ever-shrinking reality of their long and lonely days?

I think of Children’s Sabbath which we celebrate today and I’m mindful of how vulnerable children are. How many children in the world and in our own city do not have the food, the love, or the support that they need to grow and develop all the gifts that God has given them. I look around me and I see the distance between the vision God has given to us and the harsh realities we face.

¹ Frank Ramirez, *Awaken: The Art of Imaginative Preaching, Lent-Easter 2013 Year C* (Inver Grove Heights, Minnesota: Logo Productions, 2013), 51.

Thank God for the people who can look at that distance between God's vision and our reality and can see how we can move one step closer. Thank God for the vision of people who started the Crop Walk so that we can support those who are hungry. Thank God for the vision of Bread for the World so that we can join in letter writing campaigns knowing that we need some fundamental change at the policy level of our government if we have any hope of addressing the root causes of hunger and poverty.

We want the world to be a safer place for children? Thank God for the people who had the vision to start the Boys and Girls Club, and the Center for Women in Transition, and the Kids Hope mentoring program. We support these ministries trusting that each one of them will bring us just a little closer to God's vision for all children to be loved and cherished.

I admire the people who envisioned these ministries. We have people among us with that kind of vision. Elsie Lamb and Joanne Brooks and other women of Hope Church had a vision for childcare for working parents and over 45 years later that program is still going strong in our education building. Lois Maassen and some of her friends had the vision to come together as women to pool their time and energy and resources to help the community. 10 years later Women's Service day makes a great impact every year. Larry and Karen Mulder have drawn all of us into the ministry of Water Missions international with multiple mission trips over the years. David Myers has been instrumental in bringing hearing loop technology to the US and has made it possible for the hearing impaired to participate more fully in worship and in life in this community. I could go on... each of these efforts bring the vision God has for us just a little closer into view.

But I'm aware of a dynamic tension we have to hold if we are to find the place where faith is lived and God is found. It's true that we need to look at the large scale systemic change. And there are those among us with a vision like Paul's to bring the gospel far and wide whose impact can be felt around the world. But it is also true that faith is ultimately to be lived out on the small scale - in the details - with the people who cross our path on any given ordinary day.

The passage from Acts begins with Paul's vision to extend the influence of the gospel into Europe further than any of them had gone before. And it ends with Lydia welcoming them into her home to support that vision with her hospitality and financial resource. Few women are mentioned by name in the story of the gospel. Lydia is one of the few. We don't know much about her but what is said can give us some guidance in this question of where God is found and where faith is lived.

We are told that she was a worshipper of God. She had a longing to find God and live her faith in a way that contributed to God's work in the world. And we are told that she was a dealer in purple cloth; a business woman, the head of her household. Clearly she was a person with

responsibilities and work to be done. But she was also a person who longed for connection with God. As one writer put it, Lydia becomes for us a new icon: “contemplative Mary and active Martha in one.”² What we see in Lydia is the way that God’s Spirit and her longing for God come together; how God uses her day to day life both her home life and her work life in support of God’s mission in the world.

Large-scale systemic change is only possible when the values of that vision have been cultivated on the small scale person to person day in, day out in the messy little details of life. There is a cumulative effect when people bring their longing to find God into the mundane tasks and ordinary encounters of daily life. Not just a cumulative effect but an exponential effect. As Jesus assured his disciples, when we love Christ and keep Christ’s word, God’s home will be made with us. The Spirit will remind us of all that Jesus taught and as we keep that word as we live that word in the details of ordinary life God makes her home among us.

So ultimately you don’t have to **go** anywhere to find God. When the Spirit lives in you, you begin to see God in every person that you meet. You begin to experience God in every moment of your life.

After all, that’s where we are headed; to a time where there is no temple no special place where God is found but where every interaction, every human being, every square inch becomes the realm of the sacred where God is found and faith is lived.

Amen.

² Ronald Cole-Turner, *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 2 Lent Through Eastertide* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 474.