

God in Us
A Sermon Delivered
at
Plymouth Congregational Church
on
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by
Rev. Dr. Thomas Niblock

Isaiah 55: 10 – 13 & Philippians 2: 12 – 13

May God help me but I am so happy to be here standing before you this morning. There is absolutely nothing I enjoy quite so much as trying to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

When I left you in June I was dog tired and pretty well without perspective. That changed a few hours into the drive North. Even late on a Sunday afternoon as we crossed over the Georgia border and began to see the broad sweep of the low country, God began chipping away at me. The grasslands with the tidal inlets glowing red in the dying sun were so different from the beautiful lush green of our campus here in Miami. It's as if God were shouting at me, "Wake up Tom. You only live in a tiny corner of creation. Look around and open up. Neither your world nor your God are that small."

Isaiah made the point pretty well. The rains fall and sun shines and all sorts of great gifts come forth, and everywhere it's different. Part of what it means to recognize that truth is to look around. Don't get stuck thinking your perspective is the only perspective. Somehow the grasslands of South Eastern Georgia just washed over me with the possibility of a whole new day.

We spent the night there and then the next day drove up into the Blue Ridge Mountains of Western Virginia. We stopped that night about a half hour outside of Roanoke in a spot where I could look out across an endless succession of blue gray mountain ranges. From the lush green of home to the grasslands of coastal Georgia and then on to the Blue Ridge.

God's artistry is just beyond comprehension.

"The mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands." Isaiah 55

Without making this whole sermon into a travel log I will jump to the final day when we drove down to the shore of the North Atlantic in Maine and there the blue of the Ocean,

the pink granite of the Mountains and the dark green of the pine trees struck me like a sacred song of beauty and hope.

God's creation is simply a holy gift that carries the ability to awaken the blessing God has placed in each of us.

I don't worship the hills and trees. I love them but I don't worship them. I worship the God who made them. I worship the God who blessed them and gave them such extravagant beauty. I worship the God who expects us to care for this creation — and one another.

I worship the God who placed within each of us the ability to hear a tree "clap its hands". The God who blessed humanity with the ability to be restored and renewed through God's grace.

I stood in the mountains of the Blue Ridge and just marveled at the thought that the God who made this magnificence made me as well. It was particularly hard to believe that blessing when at the sunset the world glowed in gold.

Charlie Ghent grew up in the last years of the last century in one of the black towns along the Florida Georgia border. It was a hard agricultural life but at 13 Charlie was married and beginning to think about a family of his own. Then on a dark hate filled night the village was burned by a raid from fearful white neighbors. Somehow in the terror of that night as Charlie ran for his life he lost his grip on his wife's hand.

I knew Charlie some 60 years later. At 73 Charlie was retired from an outstanding career as a psychiatric social worker in Connecticut. One afternoon as I listened to his incredible story he kept repeating, "I shall work out my salvation with fear and trembling," the words we just heard from the second chapter of Philippians.

Through the nearly 100 years of Charlie's life he kept that challenge in the center. He told me, on that afternoon, that he never doubted that God would eventually blow away the smoke and the pain. What he doubted was whether or not he would live to see it.

We have all been in that place. I certainly know that I have. A place where we can't hear the song that hills sing and can't hear the clapping of the trees. A place where our own pain is so powerful that we no longer feel sure that God's blessing can help us — or indeed if it is even real at all.

Charlie went from the night of hate and fire to the totally segregated sweatshops of Chicago. He managed to get a degree from night school and eventually married and had a family.

His wife grew ill and Charlie cared for her until she finally expired a couple of years before I came to meet him.

“I kept working on that salvation thing,” Charlie confided in me, “but it was more in rage and resentment rather than fear and trembling.”

I can relate to that too!

Then, he told me. “Tom, I was walking down the concourse at Grand Central Station in New York City when I saw a black woman coming the other way.” This was a couple of years after his wife’s death and Charlie had gone down to New York to settle some matters relating to his retirement benefits. Both he and the approaching woman found themselves staring at each other. It was the wife whose hand he had lost in the night of fire some 60 years earlier.

She too had married and had a family and she too had recently lost her spouse.

“For God is at work in you.”

Charlie looked at me and laughed. He said, “I knew, after my wife died, that God wanted me to open my eyes and look around but by heavens I never dreamed what I was going to see.”

We don’t know do we?

God comes to us when we are blinded by what life has thrown at us. God urges us to open our eyes and see.

To see the grasslands of the Georgia low country

To see the smile of a friend

To see the Mountains of The Blue Ridge

To hear the lyrical notes of our incredible South Florida birds

To see a face that comes from the past with hope for the future

To see the hand of God as it moves in our living.

It’s July — time to open our eyes and behold the incredible blessing that sits before us on this table. We come to this table that our eyes may be opened to see the Jesus that is standing right beside us.

Amen