

## *Healing Our Image of God*

Isaiah 61.1-2; Luke 4.16-21

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Without some image or images of God that make sense to our minds and touch our hearts, we may become hesitant in our prayers, struggling for words or heaping up empty phrases. The longing to pray may not have left us, but since we cannot make sense of who God is and why we are praying, we simply stop.

- Jane Vennard

### *The Readings*

Isaiah 61.1-2

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; <sup>2</sup>to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn.

Luke 4.16-21

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, <sup>17</sup>and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: <sup>18</sup>*'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, <sup>19</sup>to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.' <sup>20</sup>And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. <sup>21</sup>Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'*

Some questions just ain't worth the breath it takes to ask 'em. Take for example the lawyer in Luke 10 who asks Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus didn't consider this a question worthy of response and simply launched into a story that illustrated what it means to be a neighbor. Again, the leader of a conservative denomination some years ago was asked if God hears the prayer of a Jew. He found it difficult to respond to this question, but after some reflection said no; explaining that God doesn't hear the prayers of the non-repentant. Does God hear the prayer of a Jew? Or, for that matter, my prayer or yours? Any such question ain't worth the breath it takes to ask. It's the wrong question. The question is not, does God hear

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prayer, but do we respond to God's invitation to engage in prayer. Prayer always originates with God. We don't have to attract God's attention. God constantly tries to attract our attention. God tries to get us to open our hearts honestly, in depth, and to talk to God about... well, everything: our anger, our sorrow, our frustration, our joy, our concerns, our celebrations, and from time to time an awareness of the needs of others and a request for their healing. Nevertheless, we don't often open our hearts to God's presence in such a manner. We don't often share the deepest sentiments and needs of our hearts. There are roadblocks to a healthy prayer life; and our task is to identify and skirt them, if not to remove them altogether.

We should identify and remove any and all roadblocks to prayer because the vitality of our life together depends on it. Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said that the heart of a vital faith community is its prayer life. Without it, the fabric of community begins to unravel; and individual spiritual lives begin to fade and show wear. So, let's see what we can do to identify and remove a few of the roadblocks to prayer

One primary roadblock lies in the widespread assertion that we don't know how to pray. How many times have you heard someone say, "I can't pray in public; I wouldn't know what to say?" Or, "I can't put together the eloquent prayers God's worship deserves." Or, "I don't know how to talk to God." Such objections have little to do with prayer. The eloquence of one's words, for example, doesn't necessarily have anything to do with prayer. In fact, words don't necessarily have anything to do with prayer. Being thankful, feeling remorse, or opening a heart full of concern for the needs of another; this is prayer. Ann Weems has expressed the personal dimension of prayer in a poem entitled simply, *Words*. "We say we don't know how to pray; our problem is that we never learned to say: Thank you! and I'm sorry!" Simply being honest with God; simply abiding in God's presence, trusting God, listening for God... all this is prayer. We need not speak with eloquence; we need not speak at all, but simply be with God openly and honestly.

A second and perhaps more significant roadblock to prayer lies in childish or inadequate images of God; that is to say, the notion of who God is, what God is like, and how God relates to us. Many have never moved beyond childlike, naïve images of God or, worse, negative images of God as judgmental or vindictive. And let's face it; the image of God as an old man on a cloud,

or as a tyrant pacing the halls of heaven impatiently waiting for an opportunity to strike; such images don't exactly encourage us to seek God's presence in prayer. Such images don't particularly invite us to be open and honest, to share all of the contents of our hearts with God. We need a healthy image of God to sustain a healthy prayer life.

Now, I'm not suggesting that we simply define God to our satisfaction; I'm not suggesting that we create the God with whom we would be most comfortable. Our image must be true to the original; it must reflect God's revelation to us; and Christians have always looked to the life and message of Jesus for this revelation; Jesus, in whom we have seen God most clearly. The image of God we find there will invite and encourage intimacy with God; so after we pray I would like to explore the image of God in Jesus' life and message; the image that can bring healing to our image of God and in so doing encourage us in our prayer life. Please pray with me.

God, we open our hearts to you...

...But then, maybe we don't open our hearts to God. As you continue in an attitude of prayer, I invite you to envision the God to whom you pray. Does your image of God invite you to intimacy? Is the God of your prayers a God of judgment and punishment, or is the God of your prayers a God of compassion and goodness? Does God listen intently and respond? Does God embrace you in compassion and goodness, or does God lurk in the distance, watching, waiting for you to make a misstep or to reveal something untoward? Who is the God to whom you pray this day? Envision this God and then let's compare that image to the image found in the life and ministry of Jesus.

God help us in this exercise of prayer to see you as the prophet Isaiah said, "High and lifted up." We pray in the name of the Christ in whom we see you most clearly. Amen.

The passage from Luke shared with us earlier represents the first act of Jesus' public ministry in the gospel. It's been a long time coming, especially in comparison to Mark's gospel that jumps immediately into the ministry of Jesus. Luke has more to say about the early years of Jesus' life, so only now, in chapter 4, do we arrive at the beginning of the public ministry. And, fittingly, this opening scene summarizes the ministry of Jesus that has just begun. This reading summarizes everything the life and message of Jesus stood for, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," Jesus reads, "Because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has

sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." The year of the Lord's favor; could any expression better summarize the ministry of Jesus? He's aware of it, because he concludes the reading with the assertion that Isaiah's promise has been fulfilled in their midst. It has begun, Jesus says. God is present and active among you now... this day. The significance of this convenient summary of Jesus' life and ministry lies in the image of God it sketches. The image of the God revealed in and through Jesus.

Jesus' reading draws on passages from Isaiah 58 and 61. That is with the exception of a significant phrase dropped from the reading. Isaiah announces one who is to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God. The day of vengeance; this is noticeably lacking from Jesus' reading. Why is it dropped? I know it's usually not wise to build an argument on silence – at least not in historical research – but in this instance I think this silence speaks volumes. Jesus' ministry is all about love, grace, and compassion; his ministry is all about bringing healing and wholeness to a needy humankind. But vengeance; there seems to be no room for vengeance in the image of God sketched by Jesus. There seems to be no room for a God who is judgmental and punitive. Jesus knows, and makes visible, a God who heals, a God who loves, a God who offers wholeness, a God who invites intimacy with all the sons and daughters of creation. This God – the God revealed in and through Jesus - is the one to whom we can open our hearts with reckless abandon.

Why do we hesitate, have you ever thought about that? Why are we reluctant to open our hearts to God? We need not fear the God revealed in Jesus. We need not worry whether God will hear our prayer or not. We need not take the time to reflect before responding that God hears the prayers of all; indeed, that God initiates prayer, inviting one and all to intimacy and spiritual unity. God yearns for our hearts to be open; for us to share our deepest thoughts, our highest aspirations, our most urgent needs. Share them with me, God says, because I am a God of grace and compassion and I will bring healing and wholeness into your life.

Do you want to deepen your prayer life? Do you want to go to God in prayer without hesitation or fear? If so, consider the image of God we see in Jesus of Nazareth. Here we see the God of light, life, goodness, and love. It is true, we see the God who will challenge us.

Because God wants our lives to be fulfilled beyond our wildest imaginings, God will challenge us to stretch, to push beyond our self-imposed limits in grace. But vengeance... not so much, not so much, not at all... because God's interest is in creating, redeeming, building up, and bringing lives to fulfillment; including your own.