

Living the Questions
Isaiah 55:1-13
March 7, 2010
Lin Grace Rohr

There's a story of a man who gets stranded on his roof in the midst of a huge flood. The water is climbing up the side of his house. A neighbor comes by in a raft and offers to save him. "No, I'm okay. God is going to help me." The water continues to rise, reaching the roof. A boat comes by, the captain yells, "Get on the boat, you're going to drown." The man calls back, "No, I'm okay. God is going to help me." Finally, the man is balancing up on the chimney as the water has completely covered his roof. A rescue helicopter flies by, throws down a rope ladder. The man yells above the noise of the blades, "I'm okay, really. God is going to help me!" Well, you probably figured it out, the man drowns. In heaven, the man goes up to God and says, "God, why didn't you save me." God replies, "I sent a raft, a boat and a helicopter you refused my help." The moral of the story is simple; sometimes the answers we get are not the ones we expect! Sometimes, most of the time, the question itself isn't as clear cut as it was for the man in desperate straits on the roof of his house...sometimes instead of answers, we live the questions.

This is the title for today's sermon, "Living the Questions." I can't take credit for it; it comes from a chapter of a book I'm reading by Parker Palmer, A Hidden Wholeness. Although the book has a different focus than today's sermon, this chapter's title hooked me, and wouldn't let me go. For it seems to me to be the story of faith...living the questions. Please note, I didn't say the story of religion...for many religions claim to have the answers! It's harder to live the questions than it is to assume you know the answers. Jesus challenged the "answers" of religion when he confronted the religious leaders of his day. A caution flag goes up when any religious group or leader says they have the answers, for faith is about the questions.

The story of faith is living the questions. When we're young...the big question is: "what should I do with my life?" But other questions are there as well. Some of our confirmation class teens asked these questions: "How does God see differences between people and love them all the same?" "How does God love people even if they don't believe in him or worship someone else?" When we're older, the big question is "how much time do I have left?" Some other questions are "did I do everything I wanted to do?" "Did I do everything I was supposed to do?" "Why did this or that happen to me?" In between young and old, we ask various questions and we surround ourselves with people asking similar questions while together we seek the answers, as a people of faith those we surround ourselves with are the community of faith.

In the community of faith, people have often asked me this question: "why do we study the Old Testament, if we believe in Jesus, why not just study the New Testament?" Others have asked me this question, "Why do we study the New Testament when the world of that time is so different than our world today?" Living these questions, we have partial answers. God of the Old Testament is the same God of the New...so what can we learn about God and God's relationship with God's chosen people of the Old Testament that informs and shapes our relationship as the people of the New Covenant. And the same would be true of God's relationship with the early church and how that foundation strengthens and challenges us in our faith today as we live the questions.

Isaiah 55 is an example of the people of faith, living the questions. Through the prophet, God says, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are my ways your ways," The living question, how did they know God's thoughts and ways? Isaiah was written at the end of the Babylonian

Exile. The Israelites had gotten comfortable in exile and were even thriving in Babylon, when they got permission to return to their homeland, they raised the question, why do we have to go? Through the prophet God reminds them of their close relationship; their covenant with God and God's covenant with them. Through the prophet God reminds them to listen, seek and trust God's ways for them.

The prophet's words were for the Israelites in a specific situation but there is a living question for us: is the truth of those words, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are my ways your ways," time limited? Our faith tells us, no. Throughout the Old Testament and the New, throughout the centuries since the early church, we see people of faith, including ourselves, living the question in one word, discernment.

Discernment is more than just good decision making. It's a process of separating and distinguishing one thing from another. Not just between good and evil but often the more difficult discernment is between one good and another good. For the Israelites, do we stay in Babylon or go back to our homeland? How we discern is based on our experiences in the relevant relationships. In the Israelites situation, their long time covenant relationship with God, from the Patriarchs through the first exile in Egypt, the United Kingdom, the Divided Kingdom and the second exile in Babylon... God had been with them, through the prophet Isaiah God was saying, "I am still with you... my thoughts are not your thoughts... my ways are not your ways... you've listened to me before, you've sought me before, you've trusted me before and you may not get it now, but listen, seek and trust in me again, and you will yield abundant fruit in the land I am calling you back to." They lived the question, went back to Israel and were blest.

No doubt some of you are saying to yourselves, so what? What does this have to do with us? That's a live question! A great question and we're living it. We live the questions, individually and as a community of faith. Each one of us has questions that are more pressing, more meaningful to us than other questions. For example, for some Christians, the most pressing question is how can I convert others to Christ. For other Christians, the most pressing question is how can all faith traditions live in mutual respect of one another? In Lent, the six weeks before Easter, each of us are challenged to ask ourselves what are the questions most pressing to us, how are we living those questions and how does our ongoing relationship with God inform and shape our answers as we live into the future God is calling us into. Recognizing that sometimes the answers change just like the answers changed for the man on the roof... at one point it was a raft... the situation changed... the answer was then a boat... the situation changed, the answer was then a helicopter. As we live the questions... we recognize that new information will change the answers... so we keep discerning.

As a community of faith, Covenant church is in the midst of an ongoing discernment process, started a year ago by the Session. Our thoughts then were that by the end of 2009 we would have completed this discernment process, with a plan in place, a new way forward with greater spiritual, communal, missional and financial strength. But God's ways for us were different. In our experiences being in covenant relationships with God and with one another, we, our Covenant community, are taking more than a year to discern how to go forward into the future God is calling us to. This isn't wasted time... this time is invaluable. We have lived the wisdom of resisting rushing into things, knowing that premature decisions are the leading cause of decision failures! [Margaret Benefiel] We know that it's not a decision between good and evil, but rather discernment between one good and another!

As a community discerning God's way for us we are growing stronger in our relationships with one another and with God. We are sharing God in new ways. We are listening to God in new ways. We are seeking God in new ways. We are learning to trust in God in new ways. We aren't sitting on the roof...waiting for what we think we need or want...we are welcoming the help that God is offering; we are receiving God's gifts with glad and generous hearts! We are in an exciting time as a community of faith, discerning God's thoughts and ways for us. We are doing what many churches are not or cannot do...we are living the questions. We are holding the tensions between what was and what will be. We are learning to respect and honor all perspectives in creating a community of faith that doesn't claim to have answers but rather affirms living the questions. Our questions include, what is the church's purpose? Some would say, the church's purpose is mission. Others would say to worship God in community. What is the church's future? Some would say, our children and youth. Others would say service. How do we increase diversity in our congregation? Some would say by focusing on groups of people who aren't here. Others would say we can't welcome new people until we truly embrace those God has already brought to us.

God's ways are not our ways, nor God's thoughts our thoughts. Together in faith, individually and communally...we are open to God's ways and God's thoughts, the answers may change as we live the questions but still we are listening, we are seeking, and we are trusting God's ways for us, confident that God will bring forth in and through us the fruits of the Spirit including love, peace and Easter joy!