Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

July 16, 2017

Neal MacPherson

THE GOD OF SECOND CHANCES Isaiah 55:6–13

If you were present in worship two Sundays ago, you may recall that the sermon title was “A Starchy God.” The idea that I tried to communicate, most likely unsuccessfully, was that in a time such as ours, when we are fast losing our sense of the common good, when we are fearful of the stranger and the immigrant, when policy makers, it seems, are conducting a war on the poor, we need the notion of a “starchy” God, a no-nonsense God who has every right to be angry with us, a God who may end up judging us harshly. If our nation were to come to terms with a God who is “starchy,” it might change its course of action, although these days I am not holding my breath.

This characterization of God as a demanding, starchy God comes right out of the Hebrew Scriptures. It is most clearly articulated in Deuteronomy Chapter 30, where Moses instructs the people:

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and

adversity. *If* you obey the commandments of the Lord your God

that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your

God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments,

decrees, and ordinances, *then* you shall live and become

numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that

you are entering to possess. But *if* your heart turns away and

you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods

and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you

shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to

enter and possess . . . —Deteronomy 30:15 ff.

Walter Brueggemann and other teachers of the Hebrew Scriptures call this the “common theology” of the Old Testament. This is the theology we think of usually when we think of the Hebrew Scriptures. Do good and God will reward you. Do evil and God will punish you. This is the theology that many take issue with when they approach the Old Testament because they think that it is the *only* conception of God to be found there. They want nothing to do with such a God.

At first glance, the long history of the Hebrew people seems to re-enforce this common theology. The people whom God had led out of slavery and into the Promised Land lost their way. They worshipped other gods. They engaged in all kinds of injustice. They disobeyed all those commandments set forth by Moses in the Book of Deuteronomy. The end of this story of disobedience was exile, when the Babylonian Empire overtook Judah and the king, the priests, and leading citizens were taken into captivity and forced to live in the city of Babylon. This all took place in the 6th century BCE. It looked as if the common theology of the Hebrew Scriptures ruled the day.

But wait a minute! There is a second conception of God at work in the Hebrew Scriptures. This is the God who is not just a starchy God but who is also a “God of second chances.” This is the God of grace. Indeed, in the wilderness of exile, Israel does find grace. When Israel believes that all is lost, a new beginning is announced:

*For you shall go out in joy,*

*and be led back in peace;*

*the mountains and the hills before you*

*shall burst into song,*

*and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.*

*Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;*

*instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;*

*and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial,*

*for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.*

—Isaiah 55:12–13

God has given Israel a second chance! The exiles will return home, and there will be a new beginning! Grace prevails over judgment.

And why will this be so? Here, in the poetic language of today’s reading from the prophet Isaiah, it is because the people of Israel are ready to repent, to turn around. Says the prophet,

*Seek the Lord while he may be found,  
    call upon him while he is near;  
let the wicked forsake their way,  
    and the unrighteous their thoughts;  
let them return to the Lord, that he may have mercy on them,*

*and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.*

—Isaiah 55:6–7

But there is something even more extraordinary to be understood. Elsewhere in Isaiah and in the other prophets, God at times gives a second chance *even before there is human repentance*. And so it is that God, even in the absence of repentance, declares,

*Comfort, O comfort my people,*

*says your God.*

*Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,*

*and cry to her*

*that she has served her term,*

*that her penalty is paid,*

*that she has received from the Lord’s hand*

*double for all her sins.*

*A voice cries out:*

*In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,*

*make straight in the desert a highway for our*

*God.*

*Every valley shall be lifted up,*

*and every mountain and hill be made low;*

*the uneven ground shall become level,*

*and the rough places a plain.*

*Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,*

*and all people shall see it together,*

*for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.* —Isaiah 40:1ff

And so it is that the prophet Jeremiah announces God’s gift of a new covenant even before the people have repented. And, in our own Christian tradition, so it is that the father forgives his prodigal son even before his son utters a word. This is not only a God of second chances; this is a God whose grace *comes* *before* human repentance.

There are other things to notice about this God of second chances. The second chance is offered simply because God cannot give up on those God loves. It’s like a mother who cannot abandon her wayward child. God cannot abandon us, God’s own children.

Another thing to note is that second chances are usually given in places of dire need, notably in the wilderness places of our human experience. It is in the wilderness that the voice sounds, “Prepare the way of the Lord.” And “You shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace.” It is in the wilderness that God reaches out to us in love and compassion. It is in the church’s wilderness, when it has lost hope for the future, that God reaches out with a second chance, and even a third chance, to get it right.

And then there is something that happens after a second chance is given. Second chances lead to new beginnings, and I am struck by the fact that we as a church are now engaged in a process called “New Beginnings.” In the Hebrew Scriptures, new beginnings are much like the old new beginning. The restoration of the exiles to their homeland is not unlike the Exodus when God led the ancient Hebrews out from slavery and into the freedom of the Promised Land. The new beginnings that come from second chances have their own set of demands, however. Israel, restored to the land of Judah following the exile, has work to do. In Isaiah 61, we read:

*They shall build up the ancient ruins,*

*they shall raise up the former devastations;*

*they shall repair the ruined cities,*

*the devastations of many generations.*

Yes, there is much to do. There is the work of recovery and restoration and justice and peace. Second chances and new beginnings come with requirements. As Walter Brueggemann says, we dare not think that the God of second chances is a God who is something like a cozy friend. In Bruggemann’s words, “This God is no softie, no cream puff, no good buddy.”[[1]](#footnote-1) This is a God who requires faithfulness and righteousness.

And so we have these two contrasting images of God in the Hebrew Scriptures. We have the starchy God and the God of second chances. These are not different gods. They are one and the same God. And it’s best that we keep both these images of God in our minds and hearts as we seek to be faithful. We should never find ourselves adhering to the one image of God and not the other. We should understand that God can be an angry, demanding God, and at the same time we should never forget that God is always ready to offer second chances, gracing us with forgiveness and new beginnings.

Let us keep all of this in mind as we continue to engage in our New Beginning process. By God’s good grace, we may turn the corner and find new life and hope in the midst of our own kind of wilderness. So will we more and more become the people and the church we were created to be. Amen.

1. Walter Brueggemann, *God Neighbor Empire* (Baylor University Press, 2016) 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)