

Do you ever find yourself wondering what God is up to? In the midst of this pandemic I have read a number of speculations regarding what a particular author thinks about what God's purpose is for allowing this disease to spread. Some conclude that this is just one of those things we must endure while others suggest that it is a way in which God is testing God's people. Such is often the case when we try to figure out what God is up to in a given situation. What was the objective for insisting that Abraham sacrifice the son who was a gift from God? Was there a specific objective? What was the objective for sending the apostles out on a mission trip? Opinions vary greatly. One of my Seminary teachers once challenged us to answer the question, 'What on earth is God doing?' as a way to have us grapple with the concept of what we believe God is hoping to accomplish. Questions such as these are more frequently asked during a time such as this pandemic and there have been many scholars who have offered their opinions alongside the suggestions made by lay people.

I can't say I am any closer to having an answer than anyone else but one of the lines of thought I have found most helpful contains the idea that when God created the human race it was done in order that God's image would be part of Creation. The way in which the humans were to interact with Creation was to be a way for that Creation to know its Creator. When the humans chose a different path sin infected God's image and it became distorted. God's original objective was, for a time, displaced and something had to be put in place to correct that. What was put into place was a Covenant between the Creator and one particular part of humanity. Through the ups and downs of the lives of Abraham and his descendants we see the faithfulness of God to this Covenant. Despite some pretty serious mistakes on the part of Abraham's offspring the Covenant has never been broken by God. This reality sets the background for the answer to the question, 'what is God doing?' What God is doing is restoring God's image within humanity. When Abraham believed God we are told that his belief was 'credited to him as righteousness'. This did not mean that Abraham always behaved righteously but it did mean that by God's Grace Abraham was regarded as being righteous. The goal is for humans to not only be regarded as righteous but to actually be righteous. So, what God is up to is the restoration of the original plan for Creation.

In the set of readings assigned for today we hear the story about Abraham being asked to sacrifice his son Isaac only a few years after receiving this child as a miraculous gift from God. We are not made aware of what Abraham was thinking throughout this test except that he accepted God's right to ask anything of him and he expected the faithfulness of God to come up with a solution that would allow God's promises to be fulfilled. In order for Abraham to continue in his part of the story his faith needed to be tested which tells me that from time to time the faith I have in God might be tested. If Abraham was to be the man he was meant to be God knew that his faith needed to be strong and firm. As this story was passed down through generations the lesson it seeks to teach was heard in a variety of ways but central to them all was the fact that Abraham believed in the

Covenant making God despite outward evidence. This fact challenges me when I am faced with circumstances which seem to contradict the truth of God's love for humanity and the world. God is still faithful to the Covenant and we see that faithfulness most fully in the death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah. That faithfulness has been demonstrated through the centuries and continues to be true in our century even though, at times, the evidence of our eyes and ears seems to contradict it. God is faithful - count on it!

Another reading assigned for today is the passage from Matthew's Gospel. The passage opens with words that confirm the idea that redeemed humanity will once again become the image of God. "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me". (Matthew 10:40) There is an intimate connection between Jesus and his disciples and through that relationship an intimate connection with the Creator of all. The word 'welcome' in this context speaks of something more complete than tolerance - it speaks of acceptance of Jesus' identity. The Anointed One of God has opened up the possibility of a relationship with his disciples and they were challenged with the thought that Jesus must take priority in their lives over everything. Through this welcoming the disciple will be intimately identified with Jesus the Master. Since Jesus is the culmination of God's work in restoring God's image in humanity the disciples' connection with him helps to restore God's image in them as well. Part of that restoration will result in a change of behaviour and attitude on the part of the disciples. This, I believe, is at the heart of the instructions Jesus gave his disciples when they were sent out on their mission trip. It is, I believe, at the heart of the statements about loving Jesus above all other human relationships. It is, I believe, at the heart of the reality of God restoring the image of God in humanity. These changes happen in small things like giving a cup of cold water to a little one and they happen in large things like forgiving someone 'seven times seven times'. The beginning of the change happens through belief in the faithfulness of God to the Covenant and continues as that belief becomes active through decisions.

In the Epistle reading offered today we hear St. Paul urge his readers to put forth the effort required to make these things happen. He speaks of the need to turn away from actions which go against the process of becoming more fully human. "But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification" (Romans 6:22) is one of the ways St. Paul tries to explain this reality. Sanctification is a process through which a believer will take on more and more of the image of God. This can only happen if anything that is not part of that image is put aside. "The free gift of God is eternal life [life in the age to come] in Christ Jesus our Lord. (6:23) As a further illustration of this C.S. Lewis has been quoted as saying, "But the really tough work - the bit we could not have done for ourselves - has been done for us. We have not got to try to climb up into spiritual life by our own efforts; it has already come down into the human race" (from Mere Christianity) The effort it takes to live the life of God is sometimes quite severe but it is always done in partnership with God through the Holy Spirit. What God is doing is restoring God's image in humanity through God's Messiah Jesus.

The pandemic has affected all of us in some way and we may be questioning what it all means. I'm not completely sure of what will happen next but I am sure that God remains faithful to the promise He made through Abraham to the human race. I give thanks to God for the ways in which that faithfulness has been revealed in scripture and in my own life and I pray that it will be revealed in new ways in your lives as we continue on this journey.

May the God of peace, who brought from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ, that great Shepherd of the sheep by the blood of the eternal Covenant, equip us all with everything good and bring about his purposes through us. Amen.

A note

For the next two Sundays I have arranged for ‘guest preachers’ to offer their reflections on the readings. I pray that as they prepare their messages that God’s Holy Spirit will fill their hearts with God’s love and peace. As we move through the months of summer I hope you are all able to enjoy some time in the sun while remaining safe. If you wish to contact me please feel free to use the number 705-561-0450 and if I am not able to answer when you call leave a short message. I will return your calls as quickly as I am able. Your Wardens and I will be discussing various plans for our return to our buildings under the guidelines produced by the Provincial House of Bishops and the Algoma Diocese.