

Two A.M. Questions (Walking through the Red Sea)

Betty Hollister

I just don't get it!
How could God let this happen?
Why me?
Why them?

Just...WHY?????

How many times have you asked yourself one of these ---or maybe all of these questions?

In our current world of gun violence, continued pandemic fallout, combative political rhetoric and contested elections, how can people not question?

Rachel mentioned that this week might be an appropriate time for a sermon on gratitude. Unfortunately, this sermon on the surface focuses on doubt. A recent comment by Elder Ken Chapman, helped me put this in prospective. He said that "gratitudes" are really just the flipside of doubts. Let's go with that. Even if we focus on doubts or questions, hopefully, by the end of this sermon it will become obvious there is much to be grateful for somewhere hidden in that search.

A few nights ago, (around 2 A.M.), I was thinking about how I needed to edit this sermon---YES, full disclosure: Amateur preacher---I only have one sermon. As I said times are tough. Church budgets are stretched to their limits. Anyway, I was trying to think of the last mass shooting since that fits with theme of questioning why violence is so prevalent in our culture. I don't know what scared me more. Another memory loss or fear about becoming so immune to mass shootings that they no longer register. Tragically, just since then there have we have had more senseless killings and threats of violence even in our own local schools to remind us of the prevalence of inexplicable dangers.

Of course, there is never a shortage of more personal concerns for ourselves and loved ones. Who among us has not been touched by loss or the trauma of that dreaded diagnosis? Fears of change or loss or out of control situations are pervasive. These fears, of course, seem to magnify in the middle of the night.

Yet, there are those who never seem to falter in their steadfast trust...never seem to question...never seem to lose hope. Most of us have moments like this, but what about at 2 o'clock in the morning? I don't know about you, but if my faith is ever going to be overshadowed by doubts, that is the time.

In a devotion I read recently, the author talks about doubts appearing in his mind, multiplying and, forming committees---truly the Presbyterian Way! The presence of these doubts is just one reason why I like the Psalms of Lament such as Psalm 77. The psalmists do not hesitate to take God to task with "How long, Oh Lord, or why me or just plain old how could you?"

The Lectionary suggestion skipped several verses of Psalm 77, and one of those is my favorite. Verse 4 says: **You hold my eyelids open; I am too troubled to speak, even to pray.** Well, been there, done that. How about you? No wonder the aisles of CVS or Walgreen's are stocked with sleep aid meds.

Of course, unlike my futile ditherings in the middle of the night which can go on for hours, the psalmist turns almost immediately in verse 11 to

I will call to mind the deeds of the LORD;

I will remember your wonders of old.

Instead of fretting or even clicking on a screen to play Solitaire, the psalmist turns to recalling the actions of God...not CNN or FOX News, or the Weather Channel. The psalmist spends time recalling God's character demonstrated in actions:

¹I will meditate on all your work,

and muse on your mighty deeds.

Later the verses get more specific with trembling waters, crashing thunder, flashing lightning, whirlwinds, and a shaking earth...not exactly my idea of comforting thoughts. But soon, a feeling of calm returns with God leading the flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

Now, I love the idea of being led to safety with the flock as much as anyone, but that last minute rescue begs the big questions that started all this

insomnia---Why? How long? How could you? And that leads us to the last part of verse 19...**though your footprints were not seen.**

though your **footprints** were not seen? How about if we can't see God at all? We spend so much time and energy questioning or trying to figure out God or even scientifically explaining the trembling waters, droughts and out-of-control fires or virile outbreaks that we forget about those unseen footprints...We are reminded time and time again throughout scripture that faith is believing in things unseen:

Hebrews 11:1 Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.

Yet, we continually try to take control through complete understanding, setting a timetable for the *when*, and establishing a step by step plan for the *what to do next*. Searching for those things and almost never finding them---that's what keeps me awake.

Yes, I know I have heard all the assurances you have about how God tells us some form of "Don't worry" 365 times in scripture---conveniently one for every day of the year. Unfortunately, by 2 AM, I have pretty much depleted my quota of "Fear Not." Even the coffee cup slogans like, "Don't worry. God's got this...or Let go and let God." don't help me in the middle of the night when I am so determined to question and need so much help just trusting.

A concept that has helped me more than any refrigerator magnet is an idea from Evelyn Underhill: *I don't want to believe in a God small enough that I can understand.*

I believe the actual quote is: **A god small enough to be understood will never be big enough to be worshipped.**

But at two o'clock in the morning, my version will do. All I need to remember is that I don't have to understand why school children of any age die or fear for their very lives in the classroom, why diseases such as cancer and ALS exist, why pets leave us too soon, why human greed causes wars, how political demagogues rise to power, how fear of people not like us---people who don't look like us, talk like us, believe like us---can cause us to do unspeakable things. I don't even have to understand why huge storms or climate change can take away so much from

people who have so little. I just have to believe. Yes, some may still say this is naïve. But if I understood everything with absolute certainty, there would be no need for faith. I just have to have faith that a BIG God is in control, a BIG God who never leaves our side. And yes. Just like the psalmist I need reassurances, so I try to remind myself I am not the only one who has not always remembered the size of God. I can turn to some pretty impressive Bible characters. The Lord tells Isaiah in Chapter 55:

**“For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways,”
declares the LORD.**

**⁹“As the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.**

Job heard a bit about it, too, in Chapter 38 with God’s response of **“Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you know so much.”**

OR, if I want to see actual demonstrations of faith in a God too big to understand, I can go to the people of my childhood and I am guessing some of you.

Maybe a few grew up on a farm or at least have friends or family who still farm? I do not know any greater faith without requiring complete understanding than planting those seeds in the ground and being certain grain will grow to feed God’s kingdom. With absolutely no guarantees about weather or market prices or working equipment or anything else, farmers plant the seed every season, and whether they express the faith or not, TRUST in a BIG God to make it grow.

Now that is believing in a God big enough to be worshiped. It is no coincidence that the earliest festivals of our ancestors were centered around harvest times and worshiping God.

Study those festivals and their purposes. We are so blessed here at First Presbyterian to have a “resident expert.” Our own Robert Ferrer is a veritable fount of knowledge about Hebrew traditions. Just ask him. OR on your own read and reread in our Bible the words God spoke to others who just couldn’t “get it” either. IMPRINT some of those words on your heart. Don’t memorize them.

Don't limit yourself to a certain version. Take those dark times and poignant moments of pain or confusion to implant God's assurances from your head to your heart. Yes, we do have to be careful interpreting the Lord's Word. Careful not to slant or spin God's intent to suit our own needs or beliefs. All we have to do to know what NOT to do is think of the political ads we all endured recently. But if we ask the Holy Spirit to infuse us with God's intent, we come up with holy words to guide us:

**Nothing can separate us from the love of God.
God, you are slow to anger, quick to forgive.
You will turn my mourning into dancing
Tears may last for the night, but joy comes in the morning.
With God's help I can do all things.
I will go to the watchtower and await God's answer.**

These aren't necessarily NIV or CEB or KJV or any other version. I can't even site chapter or verse, but these words from a HUGE, sometimes inscrutable God are imprinted on my heart and serve as my "go to" praise in the middle of the night.

Scholars disagree how many Covenants God made with our ancestors, but no one disputes the importance of the words God spoke in **Jeremiah 31:33**

"But this is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD. I will put My law in their minds and inscribe it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they will be My people.

So, seek and find those words inscribed on your heart. You don't have to completely understand our God to trust what is written on your heart and have faith that God still keeps that covenant. We are God's people. Trust in God's presence.

So, to get back to our point of wondering why or how could God let our world get in such a mess. I honestly don't know the answer, and if I made you hope to leave here knowing that answer, I am sorry to disappoint you.

I can't promise you there won't be more disasters this week. I can't even promise you a good night's sleep tonight. BUT I can promise you a GOD worthy of our

praise and trust...a BIG God who will be leaving invisible “footprints” for us to find all over the place IF we remember to look and a love that never fails us even if we don’t ever see the footprints. This can give us the courage to use those 2 AM moments to strengthen our faith and be grateful. God’s steadfast love even allows us to put one foot in front of the other the next morning confident there is a HUGE God always holding back the waters no matter what our own personal floods look like.

So, **without wearying** leave that **hand outstretched** to God ---our very, very BIG God and reach into the Words of God imprinted on your heart. Be reminded that the Word of God to the likes of Isaiah and Job and Jeremiah are words we can trust. Forget the middle of the night Solitaire. Worship that God too big to understand but so worthy of our trust and praise. Alleluia and Amen.