

12 October 2008

## The Sky Is Falling! The Sky Is Falling!

Which of us is not more than a little frightened by what has been happening in the financial and other business markets for the past several weeks. Many of us have investments in the stock market that are part of our present or future plans for income, and these investments have lost a great deal of value. The financial crisis is affecting the job market. Petroleum prices have finally gotten our attention and made us face the idiocy of oil dependence. It's just really a scary time, and the unfortunate fact is that fear encourages fear. Remember Chicken Little from our childhood: "The sky is falling! The sky is falling!" Actually, it feels a bit like maybe the planet Saturn has fallen on us, and we don't quite know what to do in the chaos.

What is the place of the preacher in this nexus of panic and fear? Of course, he wants to be comforting and speak of God's care for Her children. And so we shall—in a few moments.

But it's also a bit more complicated than that.

God is eternally devoted to our welfare, but He seems often to have a different concept of welfare than we do. As always for Christians, Jesus is the instructive story. God loves Jesus as intensely as She loves any of us, and yet God asked Jesus to die for a great cause. The ultimate wonder of resurrection came only through the pain of death.

Our reading from Isaiah reminds us of the great Babylonian exile of the Jewish nation in the sixth century before Jesus. Here is a people and a nation and a Temple that God loves, and yet He allows the destruction of the Temple and nation, and the people led into exile for 80 years. How can we speak of God's love in such a situation? Yet the prophets and the entire people of Israel interpreted the Babylonian exile as a punishment for abandoning God and a merciful and loving call to return to God. The unexpected return to their homeland eighty years later was seen as a miraculous turn of events that came to them as God worked through a pagan king, Cyrus the Great.

Israel's exile must raise the question for any nation who follows after her: is the difficulty we are experiencing God's call to repent of failure and to return to godly ways? I think that is question we must ask ourselves. I'm not one to see the hand of God in every little problem that comes along nor do I interpret God's call in the narrow, always sexualized way of the right wing zealot. I love my country as much as any other American and I once went to war for her. But I am biblical scholar enough to know that we are under the same judgment as any other nation and we must come up to the same standards. In the coarsening we have allowed into our culture, may it be that we have abandoned the courtesy and good will to one another that is a sign of God's presence and our respect for God's Spirit dwelling in each person? In the plundering of publicly held companies by their corporate officers, can we see the parallel to ancient Israel's abandonment of the public good? Jesus said that we would always have the poor with us, but He saw that as a call to compassion and care, not to desertion. How do we measure up to providing a living wage for our working class and basic necessities for those who are too sick mentally or

physically to take care of themselves? In our refusal to demand a basic level of health care for every American, are we the equivalent of the priest and the Levite passing by the bloodied and dying man on the road to Jericho? Have we forgotten how to provide for the sick as the Good Samaritan did? There are, of course, other matters to consider along this line, but let's stop here.

I'm not sure my interpretation is right, but it bears thinking about. Our salvation is not merely a private affair. It is contained within a community. God cares about the individual and about the community. It matters to God that we take care of one another. We ignore that call to care at our own peril.

But we should balance God's call to righteousness (for that is what this is) with God's mercy and concern. The prophet who wrote the Old Testament book of Lamentations wrote this pivotal passage in the history of knowing God's mercy: "For the Lord will not reject forever. Although he causes grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; for he does not willingly afflict or grieve anyone." (3.31-33)

What God wants for humankind, for you and me and everyone, is not affliction and suffering. Here what Paul says in his letter to the church in Galatia: "...the fruit of [God's] Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control." (5.22-23) Notice it doesn't say wealth, health, and a Hummer in the garage. In the midst of poverty, in the midst of sickness, we can have what God values most: gentleness, faithfulness, generosity, kindness, patience, peace, joy, love, self-control.

And did you hear these two sentences from today's reading from Paul's letter to the *Philippians*: "Do not worry about anything, but in everything, by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your request be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (4.6-7)

I must admit that I don't know what God has in store for us. I do know that God is good, that God cares passionately for each of us, that God can be trusted. If we cling to these convictions, as a drowning man to a life vest, we can have no fear. The future is unknown, but so is the amazing compassion of God. I will trust that love through my dying breath and into the kingdom of God. In that place and in that state there is no fear, no loss, no despair. For we will truly know that God loves us and can be trusted. That is where my trust and faith lie. May the Peace of God be always with you. Amen.