

## Does God Sleep?

Sunday, May 17, 2015, ds. Don Mader

Scripture lessons: Psalm 10:1-11; Psalm 44:23-26

Is it just me, or has the world become an appreciably worse place over the past few months? We've always had 'wars and rumours of wars' (Mark 13:7) – that is the problem with those folks who want to convince us that the end of the world is coming: there has never been a time when there were not wars and rumours of wars – but it does seem the list is getting longer. There was a time when the problems in the Middle East could be summed up under Israel/Palestine, Lebanon, and Iraq and the Kurds; now it is Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Libya, the Sudan, and most recently Yemen too; in Africa, Nigeria, Mali, Burundi, Kenya, and South Africa again; in Asia China and Japan are competing for territory again; here in Europe, the situation in the Ukraine; add to that Ebola, and the boat people situation – not just in the Mediterranean, though that seems to be reaching new heights, and around Australia, but also now off Myanmar (used to be Burma: A couple years ago we had never heard of it, we've hardly learned to Spell and pronounce it, and it is already producing refugees unwelcome in any other country). So much violence, so much oppression, so much injustice, so much suffering, so much death, it becomes overwhelming. One must be cautious about a feeling like that: it could be just a reflection of one's own feelings, projected outward on the world; it could also be a function of the way that news media choose to cover things – Myanmar being a case in point: its government oppressed its minority population, not to mention its domestic opposition, for years, but just never made it onto the front pages, until its boat people situation hit the front pages after the Mediterranean and Australian situations. But I do talk to more and more people who share the feeling that things are getting worse, rapidly, and do hear more and more people of conscience – and not just militant atheists, who use the question to mock the idea of the existence of God – asking where a God of justice and mercy is in all of this. Is God asleep at the switch? Is God asleep and unaware? Or Is this an even more damning suggestion, that God is aware of this injustice, and still able to sleep?

Whichever way it is meant, it is also, it occurred to me, a Biblical, prophetic question. That started me thinking about the image of God sleeping, and sent me back to my Bible to find the references. The first thing that I have to tell you is that I was wrong: the references were not in the prophets, as I had thought. Although there are complaints in the prophets about God being slow to act, the references to God sleeping are, as far as I can tell, all in the Psalms.

Once I had my texts in front of me, the next thing that I discovered was that in Psalms there seem to be two groups of people who are said to talk about God "sleeping" – good people and bad people. Now, that takes in just about everybody, and maybe makes this a bit of a truism. But the interesting thing is that the two groups of people are pictured as saying quite opposite things – or rather, they say the same thing with quite opposite intentions. In the light of attacks on them by 'bad' people' the 'good' people ask loudly why God seems to be sleeping, why He doesn't wake, or they demand, loudly enough to wake Him, that He cease slumbering and defend their cause. We had an instance of that in the second scripture lesson this morning, Psalm 44:23: 'Bestir yourself, Lord! Why do you sleep? Why do you turn thy face to the wall? Awake, do not reject us for ever! Get up and come to our aid!' Having somebody shouting that in your ear is as good as an alarm clock! These passages frequently occur in what I have on occasion called the 'bitching psalms': that body of psalms that lament about how awfully the speakers, or their group, are being treated by their enemies. Curiously the complaints never seem to be in

regard to the apparent general triumph of evil in general in the world – moments like that in which the poet Robert Lowell wrote of in his sonnet in response to Martin Luther King's assassination: "At this point in civilization, at this point in the world, the only satisfactory companion we can imagine is death." This degree of self-interest makes slightly uncomfortable reading – particularly when it is not even 'us' but 'me', Psalm 35, which we used as our responsive reading, being a good example. That psalm is also interesting in its somewhat curious admission that some people just might have a reason for disliking the speaker: "Lord, let not those rejoice over me who are wrongfully my foes [does that imply it is o.k. for your legitimate enemies?], let not those who wink the eye who hate me without cause." (Parenthetically, it is interesting that even the rabbis put a health warning label on these psalms, so to speak, advising that three of the more vehement bitching psalms – Psalm 7, which has another with a call on God to awake, 52 and 109 – not be used except when one has engaged in the deepest soul-searching to be sure of one's innocence.) Still, on the medical principle of *abusum non tollit usum* (abuse of something does not prohibit use), there are certainly moments when these sentiments are justified – as the 1960's axiom had it, even paranoids have enemies. Wake up, God, and get on the case!

The bad people, on the other hand, are pictured (by the 'good' people, of course!) as saying to themselves, or to one another, "God will never know what we're doing; He's asleep." Ps. 10:11, our first scripture reading this morning, is typical of these passages.

Now, why should the bad people think that? The answer, I'm afraid, lies in our human nature – but to illustrate it, let me take another example: cats. Technically, at home my cats are not permitted on the dining table. Letting them jump up there sort of encourages bad habits, like filching things off the dinner plate when I am having dinner. With each of the five cats I've had over the years, I've had the policy of lifting them off the table and putting them back on the floor when they jump up there – and sometimes, if I see them, I'll even hiss at them or speak sharply, and they will get down on their own accord. Eventually they get the point: the table is off limits. But it is quite obvious that what they really have learned from this is that they are not permitted on the dining table IF I AM PRESENT. When I am not present, and they jump up on the table, nothing happens. Therefore, they reason, for some unclear reason the table is off limits if the baas is in the room, but this behaviour is obviously permitted in the absence of the master. For instance, I can come downstairs in the morning and find dusty cat prints across the table. It even gets to the point where I will come upstairs from my office, and as I reach the top of the stairs, just before I could see into the living room, I will hear the soft but distinct 'plop' that is caused when a fat cat hits the floor from a slight height – and the cat then comes wandering out of the living room with this innocent 'Who, me? I wasn't up on any table...' look.

Well, people and cats are pretty much the same. Once one gets away with something a few times, one begins to assume that the rules apply only if the Big Boss is watching – and he clearly isn't watching all the time. And note carefully what this attitude implies: the people who say 'God is asleep' are NOT unbelievers who think there is NO God to see what they are doing. Their attitude no more implies the non-existence of a God than my cat's attitude implies my non-existence. In fact, that is the last thing that they would want – and that applies both to cats who get a food bowl put down regularly, and people who figure their religion as a deal with God, who work on the assumption that God rewards them for being such good people when he does see them. The last thing they would want is that this God of rewards for good conduct should not exist. It's just that it's handy now and then if He takes a nap. Yes, the people who say 'God will never know' are believers,

every bit as much as you and I, but merely think out loud now and then what the good man also suspects, that sometimes God is asleep.

Now, when the 'good' people complain of God's being asleep at the switch, it is generally clear from the context that this is because they are facing something which is beyond their capacity to fight back themselves. But in cases where this is a more disinterested cry, with regard to generalised evil in the world, why should the good man run around asking why God sleeps? Why doesn't he go out and do something about the evil himself?

I suspect the good men of scripture recognized something that we in our modern political pride are slow to see: that often in the face of evil there is little or nothing we can do. Most of the evil we see in the world is a creation of man – of powerful men (and women, occasionally) in governments or global institutions. Even a situation like the ebola epidemic (or the AIDS epidemic before it), which were not human creations, were made worse by the absence of a timely human response. But, whether one is a world leader or a common individual, as a rule it is a lot harder to finish something satisfactorily than it is to start it. Events have a way of taking on a life of their own. An episode like Libya or Syria makes it clear that for all our vaunted democracy and world law, there is nothing we can do – and that nothing will be done until it suits the world powers to do it, for their own purposes – and even then it will perhaps only make the situation worse. Or to take something a bit closer to home: there is little we can do in our own country about an evil, like the treatment of "illegals", except draw attention to the evil and condemn it. How much less can we do to stop or alter the course of events in the Middle East? Our "democracy" is ineffective; who do we, or anyone in any other country, vote for to change the course of things? The only parties which might change things will never be in power; as some American humorist in the 1920s – Will Rogers, perhaps? - observed, it doesn't matter who you vote for, THEY are always elected. And that assumes enough people would vote to change things if they knew, and that there was some chance they might know enough to do so; but the media so misinform people (more of the American people today believe Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction and was in cahoots with Bin Laden – MORE – than believed it nine years ago when the Iraq war started! How will a people who have been so lied to ever respond intelligently or justly?

I recall Dr. Bram van de Beek quoting an Indonesian proverb some years ago in an article I translated for him, "When the buffalo fight, the rabbits will be trampled." Weet je wel: we are the rabbits; we have no say, no more than the rabbits in the buffalo's field – about what is going on over our heads. For years, through the sixties, I advocated Christian activism of all sorts - for peace, for racial equality, for human rights, for ecology; in the last fifteen years I have grown to increasingly question its usefulness. (Curiously enough, recently I've had correspondence with an old Marxist acquaintance who is also in despair at the possibilities for a 'revolutionary vanguard' or a 'revolution' at all any more; it would seem all our hopeful, activist philosophies are dead.) But at any rate, there is an admission that we, in our modern, instrumental world are loathe to make: we are not facing merely small readjustments of a basically good system, but a massive presence of evil, "principalities and powers", as the new testament puts it, forces which are beyond our control We need to call in the reinforcements, in the nature of our God.

This brings us to the issue of hope. When Vaclav Havel writes, "Hope is a state of mind, not a state of the world," I couldn't agree more. When he says that 'Hope is definitely not the same as optimism', that "it's not the conviction that something will turn out well", again I couldn't agree more. When he accordingly concludes that "either we have hope within us, or we don't", I can still agree – depending on why we have that hope within us. When he says that "hope is an orientation of the spirit", I wait expectantly to hear what the spirit

is oriented toward for its hope – and at that point I am disappointed. For it turns out Havel is a humanist: when he says “hope is an orientation of the spirit”, what he means is that the human spirit that has this orientation toward hope – a sort of hope in hope, if you will. Hope is “the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out”. Again I agree: but what is that ‘something’? Well, it’s whatever makes sense.

I’m afraid that contemplating the record of human history, the record of the 20th century, indeed the record of that part of the 21st century we’ve lived through, I can no longer buy into the idea that the human spirit has within itself the capacity to improve life, much less to save itself. Things may seem to get better for a while – I thankfully lived through some of those hopeful cultural moments - “Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, but to be young was very heaven”, as Wordsworth put it – and I pity those who have not – but the one thing that is certain is that things will get worse again. The fact that our hope is usually rooted in the human spirit is a part of the problem, not part of the solution.

In light of this, let me put in a good word for something outside ourselves: for the Torah, the Word in its largest, and not smallest, proof-texting sense, and Jesus Christ. To be hopeful, the human spirit must be oriented to something outside itself, something not limited by time and place, something not limited by the being and survival of the individual and his or her immediate concerns. Meaning comes, if not from ‘above’, at least from beyond. ‘Big stories’ are not very popular today, in our day of post-modernism, and the bad odour surrounding some of the ‘big stories’ adopted by fundamentalists of all stripes – Christian, Muslim, Jewish. But the issue is not the stories themselves, but the content of these particular, parochial ‘big stories’ - stories which are not big enough. The really fundamental story of the Torah, with its statement of the oneness of God in the whole world and its demand for justice can care for the weakest in society, of the Koran in its statement that God is the all-merciful, or of Jesus, who we know as the Christ, in his message of forgiveness and reconciliation and peace, anchors us in a larger vision of peace and justice that has sense and meaning, and feeds hope. Is that larger vision ridiculous in light of events here and now? As Havel said, that is not the point of hope. We are here back to the dispute between A.J. Muste and Reinhold Niebuhr, about what Muste called the ‘relevance of an impossible ideal’. Their dispute was about pacifism: Niebuhr said pacifism was impractical, impossible, an inadequate response to injustice; Muste agreed – but pointed out that it was nevertheless the command which we had received, both in so many words, and in the very being and acting of Jesus Christ. Their argument was about pacifism; the same could be said about so many other issues: our Christian witness – and that is a witness in words, but even more in actions – for economic and social justice, for brotherhood, for reconciliation, for repentance and forgiveness and restoration of the perpetrator – is apparently impractical, useless. But, paradoxically, that is precisely the reason that we must continue to speak and act, (to quote Havel again) “to continually try new things, even in conditions that seem as hopeless as ours do, here and now.” We do this because we have before us a vision that is not limited to the human and the here and now. What the relation is between our actions and the accomplishment of that vision is a whole issue that is larger than we can deal with here, but that vision outside ourselves is a call to continued action, the only action which is meaningful in a limited world. It is certainly not “living pointlessly, emptily, without meaning, without love, and finally without hope” as Havel sketches the alternative.

There is however a sense in which it seems that our only possibilities are negative: at the very least, we can and must disassociate ourselves from that evil is going on – basically, Henry David Thoreau’s general observation that ‘it is not a man’s duty, as a matter of course, to devote himself to the eradication of any, even the most enormous wrong; he may still properly have other concerns to engage him; but it is his duty at least to wash his

hands of it, and, if he gives it no thought longer, not to give it practically his support.' If that is true for humanists, how much more true is that for Christians! As Christians, with the vision from beyond that serves as a plumb line for our world, it is also our duty to protest prophetically against evil, to quietly create and demonstrate alternatives to evils of injustice and exclusion in our Christian communities, to mourn for the victims of evil ('blessed are those who mourn': in the case of Palestine and Israel, to mourn for a people who, having suffered unimaginably at our hands in the past, now have lost their moral compass entirely in the course of wanting to be "like the other nations" - precisely what Samuel warned them against! - even while we mourn their victims), and finally to offer what aid we can. But changing the world is the work of the Lord – which is something we acknowledge when we ask why he seems to sleep. That doesn't answer why God seems to sleep, why God is so slow – his times are not our times, his purposes and ways not ours, being in the very least much longer-term and wider in scope; God may be respecting our human choices, even though wrong, or awaiting our contribution, or giving us the room to grow; we may someday see God's purpose in tolerating evil at the moment, or we may never, but our impatience with God at least acknowledges our rabbinhood in the world field.

Our final and ultimate source of hope is that, as Psalm 121 (which we will use in a moment as a rhymed Psalm, a hymn) has it, 'our God neither slumbers nor sleeps'. We may not know why it seems he does – or at least why he 'tarries so long' – when our own interests are at stake, or greater issues of justice and humanity. We know only that the final end toward which creation tends is a realm of justice and peace, which we are privileged to announce in our actions as the church and proclaim in our words – while we wait, and occasionally complain.