

What God Does
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Jody Ondich

I use a devotional each day called "Listening to Your Life" written by the Presbyterian theologian and storyteller Frederick Buechner. He says things that really hit home for me. The reading for this last Friday was especially telling, especially considering the sermon I was working on! He was talking about having been asked to be a resident scholar and guest professor for a semester at Wheaton College, which is a relatively conservative Christian school. He had commented on the fact that as a guest he did not have to sign the pledge that the faculty and students had to sign, which prohibited smoking, alcohol and dancing while attending or working at Wheaton. And Buechner comments that if he had known about the dancing clause, that he might have declined the invitation on principle--and then would have missed a very important opportunity.

Buechner then goes on to describe an incident. He says, "One day I was having lunch with two Wheaton students who were talking about whatever they were talking about--the weather, the movies,--when without warning one of them asked the other as naturally as he would have asked the time of day what God was doing in his life.

If there is anything in this world I believe, it is that God is indeed doing all kinds of things in the lives of all of

us including those who do not believe in God and would have nothing to do with him if they did, but in the part of the East where I live, if anybody were to ask a question like that, even among religious people, the sky would fall, the walls would cave in, the grass would wither. I think the very air would stop my mouth if I opened it to speak such words among just about any group of people I can think of in the East because their faith itself, if they happen to have any, is one of the secrets that they have kept so long that it might almost as well not exist. The result was that to find myself at Wheaton among people who, although they spoke about it in different words from mine, and expressed it in their lives differently, not only believed in Christ and his reign more or less as I did but were also not ashamed or embarrassed to say so was like finding something which, only when I tasted it, I realized I had been starving for for years."

What is God doing in your life? I admit that I would squirm like anything when I was asked that question by a very conservative highschool friend, and I realize that now, the reason that I squirmed was because I wasn't at all sure that God was doing anything in my life! Which is a sad and understandable realization. How many 17 year olds can tell you what they think God is up to in their lives? They are often working on the "Is there a god?" question, at least in the time when they aren't working on the "Who am I?" question. But still--for anyone to think that God may not

be doing anything in their life is a shame. Even more to the point, it is flat out contrary to the Biblical faith.

The psalm we read this morning is the only one in the Bible actually entitled "A Psalm of Praise" Obviously many of the psalms are praise psalms, but this one has that title. It is also an acrostic--in Hebrew the first word on each succeeding verse has the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. And the commentary that I was reading this week also made the comment that this was a litany of sacred names for God--that many of the adjectives could also be translated as verbs. So that if the verse described God as a compassionate God, then it could also be translated as a God who does compassion. And I found that very interesting, in a mild sort of academic way, until I read the Buechner devotional. And then it clicked that the idea behind this psalm is to remind the one singing it--because the psalms are written to be sung--that they know and praise God for all of the things that God does and has done and will do. Which is precisely what I have been talking to the Confirmands about for the last 6 weeks! We have a deal that if they only remember one thing about our discussion of God stuff that it will be this one sentence. "The bible says that we know God by what God does."

And so listen to the list of things God does, according to this psalm! God reigns as sovereign, God is strong and powerful--God does strong and powerful things, it can be

translated, God does good, God does righteousness, God does mercy, God is slow to anger---patient, wouldn't that be?---God loves, God does compassion, God does mighty deeds, God is faithful, gracious, God upholds the falling, raises up the bowed down, feeds and satisfies the people, God does justice and kindness, and is near to all. God fulfills desires, hears our cries, saves the people, watches---and destroys the evil.

And surely that is not a complete list, but only the particular list written to fit this psalm of praise.

There are times in our lives when we are aware of some overall theme, some strong tie that seems to bind all the happenings of our lives together into a sort of whole. Some of those times are wonderful---and some of those times are very difficult. I went through one stage of my own life as a young adult where I was aware that something was happening to me, but I wasn't at all sure what, and as a consequence was anxious and vaguely unhappy. It was the year after college, and I had gone to Norway for the year, to the University of Bergen to study the language and Scandinavian Christian History, but also to figure out my relationship with a very dear redheaded man whom I had met at St. Olaf as an exchange student. We had visited back and forth over the years, an expensive and exciting thing to do, and had written volumes of letters. And so off I went to figure out this piece of my life. I had a wonderful time--

Norway is beautiful, and Bergen is one of the most beautiful places in this lovely country. But in the midst of a great experience was this underlying concern that something was wrong with the relationship. It finally came out--he was very uncomfortable with my decision to go into the ministry, and so concerned that he had decided that we could not be married after all. Which was devastating. I spent a lot of time thinking about it, and worrying. The brother of this young man was a medical student at the University of Bergen, and one day, in exasperation, he said to me, "Jody, why are you letting him run your life? "

And the vague uneasiness and misery immediately diminished. That is what God was doing in my life--making me learn to take charge of it for myself. No more professors or parents or well-meaning friends were to direct me, but I needed to do it on my own.

It takes some listening. We have to keep our ears and our eyes open, not to mention our minds and hearts, to get an idea of what is happening to us. Are we experiencing a lot of conflict? Do we have tough situations to work through everywhere we turn? Maybe what God is doing with us is helping us to learn tact, patience, special skills for living. Are we experiencing a lot of health problems? Maybe we need to be looking at our pace, our lifestyle, our way of treating this temple of God we call a body. Are we finding things just settling into place, finding satisfaction in

much of what we are doing, getting joy from little things? Then maybe God is fulfilling some dreams for us, helping us gather strength and energy.

We can find all sorts of activity in our lives, and it is too easy to just write it off as the way life goes. It is the way life goes--and God is in the middle of that going, guiding, teaching, leading, chastizing, comforting, judging, feeding us.

It is dangerous to say that God is not active in our lives because we can't see God, can't touch God, can't point at something and say--"Ah-ha! that must be God doing that." It is too easy to assume that if we don't have some sort of mystical, dramatic encounter with the divine, then the divine must not be present. We wistfully want to see angels, hear voices, or dream portentous dreams in order to assure us that God is talking to us, and not someone else. The reality is that God is as present in our lives as good bread, as active as water, as necessary as air. We get so accustomed to the divine that we no longer are easily able to see it, no longer as aware that we walk on holy ground. And that is a shame.

What is happening in your life? What are the patterns? What are the things that consume your thoughts, that keep you awake in the middle of the night, that walk with you even when you are not consciously aware? Because these are the places where God is doing great things with you. It is

easier to see them when they are past and somewhat settled.

I can see what God was doing with me when I was 22. 15 years gives a great perspective! But what is God doing with me now? Well, I'm working on it. All I can really say for sure is that I do know and affirm that God is there, active, molding and helping, listening and sympathizing, judging, weighing, pushing and loving me. and you.

When we praise God, we praise God for activity, for verbs, for adjectives that give us hope and help. So there is one sentence for you to take home with you for affirmation and strength this week. We know God through what God does--in each of our lives. Praise God for all of God's works! Amen