

“Fixed Eyes”

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Sunday, January 27 / Annual Meeting & Soup Sunday

1 Corinthians 12:12-31; Luke 4:14-21

“But where is God, really?” She asked me. A young woman now, she was in my youth group for seven years. Always positive, always a hard worker. She went on every mission trip. Then she went on to get a degree in social work. After seeing some of the worst poverty, people suffering from addictions, abuse and despair, she asked me her question: “If God was around, wouldn’t some of this be taken care of? How can there be so much suffering?”

The conversation with the bright young woman went downhill from there. She was right. If there is an all-powerful God, then that God must be powerfully cruel or not-so-powerful.

The phone call ended with me feeling deflated and not having an ounce of confidence in my beliefs or my ministry. When suffering is so blatantly staring us all in the face, only the blindest of us can say we can not see. Our eyes are fixed on something invisible to the rest of the world.

I am tired of seeing the pain in the world. I am tired of seeing people in our country standing in food bank lines because the government they work for won’t pay them for their work. People are suffering all around us, whether due to the government shut-down or the things that have gone wrong in life and left them without the where-with-all to cope.

So, I do understand this young woman’s question, “Where is God, really?”

Jesus began his ministry marching around the countryside, entering synagogues, reading the holy scriptures, and preaching hope. He didn’t preach vengeance or judgment of fearful things. He preached the good news. And people loved him for it. Crowds gathered when they heard he was in town. He grew his fan base just by walking through the city gates.

Until he went home.

When he got to Nazareth, he saw his friends and neighbors. He maybe saw relatives like aunts, uncles and cousins. The children he grew up with were now settled with families of their own. And when the sabbath arrived they all watched as Jesus stepped up in front of the home-town crowd and read the lesson from the prophet Isaiah.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Then he put a fine point on this reading when he said, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Basically, he let them all know that the Messiah had arrived and the Messiah was the kid they had all watched grow up down the road.

Jesus had gone home to bring good news, but he was not welcomed there. Next week we will read the unhappy result of this little proclamation of his.

But for today, the people crammed into the synagogue couldn't take their eyes off Jesus. Their eyes "were fixed," our passage says.

How does this promise of all good news fit with what we see all around the world? How does this promise of all good news fit with all the stories that fill history books from forever ago until now? We know that after this reading good news didn't immediately change the plight of the Jews living under Roman rule. We know that Jesus kept on preaching, teaching, and healing for three years and then was killed by the Romans with condemnation from his own people.

"So, where is God really?" She asked me.

Paul continues his long description of spiritual gifts with the analogy of a human body. We are all part of the body and not one of us is more important than another. The eye can't say, "Because I'm not a foot, I don't belong." Every part of the body matters and has purpose.

I love this part of Paul's writing: "...the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect."

Good News and hope, the things Jesus read from scripture in the synagogue in his hometown, might have been in short supply at that time. I know they are in short supply in our time. The young woman's question to me about God's presence is perennial. Or maybe terminal. If God can't be found, how do we survive as the Body of Christ?

When the world seems bleak, existential questions such as, "If God is all-powerful and all-good, why is there so much out-of-control evil and suffering?"

I can't give you an answer. At least not one that would satisfy everyone sitting here today and certainly not one that would satisfy the young woman who had questioned me so thoroughly. Platitudes won't work today.

All I can ask is where are our eyes fixed? On what or whom are we focused?

The people in the Nazareth synagogue had their eyes fixed on Jesus, but not because they believed him.

Do we believe him? Do we believe what he said that day, and every day of his life recorded in the bible, is the truth? Do we remember each thing he said is Good News?

We may need to begin with Paul's letter to the Corinthians. We may have to remember that we are all part of the Body of Christ and no one is better than another. We are dependent on one another. We uplift one another. The blind receive sight. The captives are released. The poor are protected. All who are oppressed in any way are set free. All the good news is for all the people. If one member suffers, we all suffer. If one member rejoices, we all rejoice.

As long as our eyes are fixed on the head of the body, Jesus Christ.

There is a song I love by the group “For King and Country”. It’s called “Fix My Eyes”

The chorus to the song is this:

“I’d love like I’m not scared

Give when it’s not fair

Live life for another

Take time for a brother

Fight for the weak ones

Speak out for freedom

Find faith in the battle

Stand tall, but above it all

Fix my eyes on you.”

“But where is God really?” Her question haunts. However, seeing how she lives her life, I see how God is everywhere she goes. She goes to the hard places with the most vulnerable people. She does the practical work and the process work and policy work to bring relief to the oppressed. She works with others, almost the way a body must work together to function. God is everywhere she walks, and among all those like her. God is in those who are comforted and fed and made whole and released from whatever bondage holds them down.

Jesus said so.

(Invite congregation to close their eyes and imagine Jesus looking at them and speaking to them.)

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.”

May we fix our eyes on Jesus Christ so we can proclaim good news with action, integrity, and joy.