

LENT

Psalm 98, Song of Solomon 2: 8-13, Ruth 1:16b - 17

My father, being a rough railroad man, likely knew nothing of Lent – and if he had – wouldn't have liked it; for Lent is such a sad, somber season – all about sin and death and woe – you might think God was dead and gone and we were at the wake. If, however, you were too much of a “gloomy Gus” around my father, if things were going all wrong and you were too “woebegone” and sad – my dad would say – “God is alive! Things are not that bad!” I used to think that was profanity. Now I think it was his profession of faith. No matter what the circumstances, no matter how bad -- the good God was not dead. He was very much alive and life was looking up. After all – Lent is but forty dark, chilly days to prepare for the dawn of Easter: and “Lord God Alive” is the Easter faith. So that even before we get to the empty tomb of Easter – there are so many evidences that the good God really is alive in the world no matter how bad things are.

For example – God lives wherever nature sets us to singing, wherever the sight, the sound, the touch of the natural world puts a Psalm in our hearts. No matter what the circumstances —God is not gone. He is alive, and very much present wherever a person walks under the sky and feels the rain in his face or the sun – walks into the hills, along the shore, and sings his praise, sings literally for dear “Life”:

“Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth;

Break forth into joyous song and sing praises!

Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre and with the sound of melody!

With trumpets and the sound of the horn

Make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord!

Let the sea roar, and all that fills it;

The world and those who dwell in it!

Let the floods clap their hands;

Let the hills sing for joy together before the Lord...”(Psalm 98)

The 98th Psalm, like my dad, would not have liked Lent either.

God is gone? No. The good God is alive and present wherever we are sensitive enough to hear the deep harmonies of creation, and take up our guitar, and sing away for dear life.

Secondly, no matter how bad things are – the good God is also very much alive – wherever a man and a woman rejoice in each other, in the sight and sound and touch of the beloved. No one in love can quite believe that God is gone, that life is leaden, that the heavens are made of brass. The Old Testament rabbis were right to call the open, warm and honest love of a man and a woman “The Song of all Songs.”

The woman sings:

**“Hark, my beloved!
There he comes
Leaping over mountains,
Ascending over hills
My beloved is like a gazelle
Or like a young stag.”**

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Now the man sings:

**“Arise, my darling;
My fair one, come away with me!
For the winter is past,
The rains are over and gone.
The blossoms have appeared in the land,
The time of singing has come;
The song of the turtledove is heard in our land.
The green figs will form on the fig tree,
The vines in blossom will give off fragrance.
Arise my darling;
My fair one, come away!” (Song of Solomon 2:8-13)**

Who thinks God is dead? Not you – not if you’ve ever in your life held another life in tenderness, in deep affection, not if the sight, the sound, the touch of someone beloved has ever put the world, your world, in tune. If there is someone, someone maybe long gone, whose memory is still very dear to you, or someone still near you – someone you can’t wait when day is done – to get home to – the good God is not gone, not to you. He is still very much alive and present.

Where? Not only in the love of nature, not only in the love of the beloved, but wherever lives touch each other, and make a family of it, share a kinship and a caring.

If you move from “The Song of Songs” to the “Book of Ruth”, God is very much alive there in a family’s love. Sickness has come to that family, death has come, but love lives on – in the loyalty of three people – one a young woman, one an old woman, and one a middle aged man. Do you think people like Naomi and Ruth, and Boaz have passed from the earth? Do you think all such family kindness is dead? No. There are still families that stick together, that in one way and another still say to one another, “Whither you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried”. (Ruth 1:16b-17)

Listen to me. There are still families where covenants like this are still very sacred, families who still uphold, encourage, sustain one another. Love in the family is not dead. Banality does not rule all households. There is many a family in whose love God is very much alive – all the way through life, to death.

In the fourth place, if you read the Book of Jonah, you will discover that God is not only alive in one’s love of the beloved, and the intimate family – but the good God is also alive wherever we discover the love of the whole family of man. God really comes alive when we discover to whom we belong, that all humanity is our responsibility, our kin. The good God really begins to live, when we discover we

don't just belong to ourselves or to our beloved, or even to our inner family and friends. Like Jonah out of the whale, when we discover we belong to the wide, wide world, that the whole round world is a part of us. The goodness of God was truly alive in Jesus of Nazareth the day he pointed to a crowd of strangers and said, "Here is my family" for "God so loved" –what? – "The world " that he gave himself to it – that he came alive in it in the life of Jesus Christ.

God dead? No, God is not dead, not in a community, not in a nation, not in a family of nations where so many are so concerned with the need of the people. "God is alive!" Never in human history, I think, has so much been attempted by so many to alleviate human pain, human poverty, and human prejudice. Never before in recorded history has there been such concern for the aged, for children; never have human rights been so universally fought for. In spite of all the terrors of our time, this will probably be known some day, not as the atomic age, but as the humanitarian one.

We may hurt each other, even in trying so desperately to help each other, but as long as we don't hate or just neglect each other, there is much hope.

So, I say to you, God is not gone from life. He is very much alive, living here – wherever a person loves his life, loves his beloved, loves his family and his friends, and wherever he responds to the needs of the whole family of earth. Wherever that sort of love is, there is God, the good God alive.

Let us pray:

O Lord Christ, some of us act as though we don't love life. But we're only kidding, Lord. We actually do want to live, really live. We'd like to spend long days under the sun. We'd like to laugh, and do our work, and not be afraid of ourselves or hate anyone. We'd like to do as our Lord said, "This is my command, that ye love one another. So may it be. Amen