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# Becoming with God

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 31 December 2023

Isaiah 61:10-62:3 • Galatians 4:4-7 • Luke 2:22-40

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May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

As I looked through today's Bible passages, the idea that struck me was that God's world is always in a state of becoming. It is being developed; it is moving forward. We see it in Isaiah, who says that God

has clothed me with garments of salvation  
and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness,  
as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest,  
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

Isaiah is being prepared for service to God, and indeed his prophecies, and the book which was compiled from those prophecies, is his service to God, a service from which we all still benefit. Isaiah goes on to talk about seeds growing and sprouts coming up, using the common agricultural themes we all

understand, in speaking about God's righteousness coming to all the nations. God is developing the world into the righteous, free, peaceful place God had always designed it to be. The world is becoming God's kingdom, a slow process, perhaps, from our point of view; but on schedule according to God.

Paul talks about us being sons (and daughters) of God, and because we are, we are also heirs, a most favoured position. Jesus is the Son of God, but we are his brothers and sisters, and so we are also children of God. Children are raised, instructed, taught how to live and given a good start in life. That is where we are as children of God. We are being developed, as parents develop their children to be competent adults. We are becoming.

What does this mean for us? For one thing, it means we are in good hands. We are not on our own. I think we have all, as adults, had the experience of first being "on our own", perhaps when we went away to university, or travelled abroad for the first time without our parents. We had to draw on our own knowledge, intelligence, common sense to get by, to find our way without our mothers or fathers holding our hands. But we had been prepared by our parents to survive, and not just to survive, to thrive, making our way in the world and establishing ourselves in homes and finding mates and perhaps starting families. Without the good grounding our parents gave us, we would have struggled. And I know that some of us had a good grounding, and some did not, due to broken families or other reasons. And I'd guess that many of us were not completely cut off from parental advice or support, although a few of us may have been thrown off the dock, so to speak, and had to learn to swim for ourselves. Even so, the society we live in, and the life experiences we have, allow us to get on.

But without God, we will not get on. God sustains us, and this entire world, every moment of every day. It is good to recognise this, even if we tend to take it for granted most days. Most days we get up in the morning, get dressed, have breakfast, go to work or school. I remember when I first went off to university and lived in on-campus housing, sharing a room with another fellow. My parents were not physically there, not with me in the same building, for the first time. But in a way, they were there, because for 17 years they had taught me how to act, how to be around other people, how to organise my time (though I wasn't very good at that, at age 17, I must admit!). So their teaching and their reassurance followed me and helped me to make a success of my university life.

Can we think about God in the same way? Paul says we are sons and daughters of God, and God gives us life. Can we put God in the place of our parents in our affections, and make God the one we trust and depend on? I think it is difficult, even for good Christians, because of course our parents are flesh and blood, immediate, able to be touched and seen and spoken to. That I think is

the challenge of faith. We try to acknowledge Christ as our Lord, and God as our Maker, and we strive to obey the greatest commandment, to love the Lord our God with all our heart and mind. We seek to put all our troubles and concerns, as well as our joys and thanks, before God in prayer. And yet, to truly make God number one in our lives is difficult.

Like anything else worthwhile, it takes practice. We begin with simple prayer, at set times, such as here in church. We say the words and we mentally offer them up to God (because thinking in terms of “up” is natural for us). We try to be honest within ourselves, so that the words we say in the prayers we make are truly what is on our hearts. In time, it becomes more natural and easy to do. We may then try to pray more often, and less formally, in order to start having a conversation with God. The conversation ideally will become more or less constant, so that we are “checking in” with God regularly throughout the day, or even when we wake at night. In time, we come to depend on this conversation — we come to depend on God. Some of us hear or sense God speaking back; some of us just feel a general response or attachment. Either way, we are building that connection, and it will become the most important connection in your lives.

This doesn’t mean that we abandon our relationships with parents, brothers, sisters, children, friends. All those relationships can only be strengthened by the constant connection with God, since what we share with those people will be part of what we share with God too. And ideally, we will share the love and connection to God with those people as well, for this is what God desires.

In our Gospel today we meet two people who had that connection to God. Simeon and Anna had both dedicated their lives to God, and rejoiced in meeting the baby Jesus for the first time. The Holy Spirit had told Simeon about Jesus’ coming, and that he would not die before meeting his Saviour. Anna, too, who was a prophet, had certainly been told by God about Jesus. Both lived in Communion with God, and they are a wonderful example for us all. From them we learn the great blessing which is to be ours if we remain open to God.

I finish with Isaiah’s words from the beginning of our passage:

I delight greatly in the Lord;  
my soul rejoices in my God.

May we all be able to say the same in very truth and thankfulness to God.  
Amen.