

The God Who Won't Let Go (V): It's in Our Genes

A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Text: Jeremiah 31:31-34

There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life. That's the sign appearing on public buses in London, part of an ad campaign sponsored by the British Atheist Society, underwritten with a donation from Richard Dawkins, author of *The God Delusion*. The brilliant evolutionary biologist sees religion as an oppressive system to keep people from thinking, and to make them anxious and dependent. Apparently the ads caused more than a little stir, particularly when the Methodist Church sent a congratulatory note to Dawkins, thanking him for stimulating public conversation about spiritual matters! (No update on what Dawkins thought of that!)

A vastly different perspective is expressed by another scientist of equal renown, Francis Collins, who directed The Human Genome Project as it completed the mapping and sequencing of the body's DNA structure. He finds in the intricacy and complexity of the human genome—a three-billion-letter code within each cell that informs and directs cellular processes—evidence of God's creative genius. He says, "It is humbling for me and awe-inspiring to realize that we have caught the first glimpse of our own instruction book, previously known only to God." In an interview on National Public Radio, he spoke of the human genome as a history book, a medical journal, and a tool catalog, and we are beginning readers, first-graders, filled with fresh wonder at the new worlds opening before us.

I've never understood (let alone accepted!) the purported incompatibility of science and faith. The two seem to be different ways of seeking understanding about human life. Science can show us the "what" and the "how" and boggle our minds with discovery and data. On the other hand, it takes

religion to address the "why." Faith reveals meaning and purpose invisibly woven into our breathtaking biological reality, and the "who" behind it all. It's true we won't find God under a microscope, but we can come to know God without sacrificing our minds. In fact, the knowledge of God helps us experience life fully, in both its rich material and spiritual dimensions.

The Judeo Christian tradition provides a lens through which to find God, by presenting history as the arena for God's creative and redemptive activity. In the beginning God created. The creation accounts in Genesis do not give a scientific explanation of cosmology; they were not intended even as a description of "how" or "how long." Instead, the poetry and imagery of these texts affirm the Divine origin of all that is, and to outline the relationship between God and creation, and why things got so troubled. God remains active in human history, working to heal its hurts and restore its rifts toward a day when all people shall live in peace under God's gracious rule. We intercede for that reality every time we pray the Lord's Prayer (no matter which version we use!): Your kingdom come, your will be done, *on earth* as in heaven.

Our faith history mirrors the human one. God is known through the covenant agreements God made with God's people. The rainbow in the rain, the daring call to leave the comfort of home and venture into new territory, freedom from slavery and the gift of the Law and a land----during Lent we have examined these covenants and seen how each was established as a sign of God's love and grace. With the intensity of a scientist probing the mysteries of cell biology or astrophysics, we have trained a spiritual eye on the human response to these covenants and seen how they were eagerly embraced, and then all too quickly forgotten, broken, ignored.

But the God we have come to know through faith simply won't let go, refuses to let ignorance or amnesia or willful disobedience have the last word. In some ways, the text this morning might be considered "the covenant to end all

covenants.” It was announced many years after those ancient covenants, at a low point in the nation’s history. Having been conquered by Babylon, they were exiled—literally and figuratively--- from everything they knew and had counted on. The rock solid foundations of the past had shifted and even disappeared. Old securities had proved unreliable. The situation was dire; the people, devastated. When will things turn around? The future—once so bright and promising---was obscured by uncertainty and doubt that life could be good and trustworthy again. Into this place—which sounds strikingly contemporary—strides a young prophet, proclaiming impossible good news. Listen for God’s word in the reading from the Hebrew Scriptures, the book of the prophet Jeremiah, in the thirty-first chapter at the thirty-first verse.

[JEREMIAH 31:31-34]

Think of time in your life when you knew something, you just knew it, deep in your bones. Maybe it followed a period of wrestling and questioning and weighing many options back and forth. Maybe there wasn’t even evidence to support your conviction. But suddenly—or gradually---the clouds parted and there it was, in shimmering clarity. Some people call it a leap of faith, or going with your gut. Others might scoff and call it irrational. But I think that’s what Jeremiah might call “knowing by heart.” And no one can dissuade us from such knowledge by argument or objection. In fact, it galvanizes us to take another step, inspires us to action. This is knowledge by which to live.

Yesterday at a memorial service in our chapel, I heard the testimony of someone who knows death and life. Amid a series of touching tributes, one young man, nephew of the deceased, took a different approach. He acknowledged how deeply she would be missed, but then startled the gathered group of mourners with a bold statement he delivered without notes, looking us straight in the eye. “She’s not really gone, you know. She’s just living from another perspective, in a different dimension. If you know where to look, she’ll be there, just as she always.” I think that is the best description

of the “communion of the saints” I’ve ever heard. God’s Word of life, God’s covenant of hope, written on Alex’s heart.

The new covenant God makes in this text isn’t really new. Did you notice? *I will be your God and you will be my people.* Word for word identical to the covenants of old. An irrevocable promise of divine/human relationship. Yet what IS new about it is that will no longer be imposed from the outside, an external law. Instead it will be written on the hearts of the people; it will become internalized; they will know it in the very core of their being. The new covenant will become such an intrinsic part of the people’s identity they won’t even have to teach one another the truth of God. Everyone will know it by heart. The late Roman Catholic priest and author of some of the most thoughtful books on Christian spirituality I’ve ever encountered, describes it this way:

By ‘heart’ I mean the center of our being,
the place where we are most ourselves, where
we are most human, where we are most real.
In that sense the heart is the focus of the
spiritual life.

[*Nouwen, Letters to Marc about Jesus, pp. 3-4*]

Do you and I know God by heart in this sense? The power of the new covenant lies in an experience of change in the way things are, in the way *we* are. We know the bad news so well—and see everywhere the consequences of human sin, ignorance, and evil. Yet the new covenant announces *good* news: a time when God will make all things new, when fear will be quieted by real hope, when death will be swallowed up in victory.

No longer will we simply know “about” God—through philosophical reasoning, metaphysical analysis, even theological belief statements. The days are coming says God when people from the least to the greatest—will *know* God; that is, will relate to God as the Source of life and love, and know themselves as God’s beloved sons and daughters. To know *ourselves* as God’s beloved sons and daughters, and grow

in knowledge about how to walk God's way. The knowledge of God will be so central to what it means to be human that it will be no more possible for us to live without God than it would be to live without DNA.

Last week, the meeting of the Presbytery of the Western Reserve included discussion and vote upon an amendment to the Presbyterian Church's constitution that would remove the automatic bar to ordination for gay and lesbian persons. You will be proud to know that one of our elders, seventeen-year-old Kevin Benton, addressed the assembly, speaking for the amendment. "I don't know about the interpretation of some of the Bible texts being quoted," he began, "but I do know one: For God so loved the world that he gave His Son....not to condemn the world, but to save it. The church I grew up in taught me that God's love is for everybody." (*Sorry, Kevin, if I didn't quote your words exactly....it's hard to write when your eyes are overflowing with tears*) The amendment passed by a two-to-one margin. Thank you, God, for writing your Word of unconditional love and grace upon Kevin's heart, and upon the heart of this congregation.

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant. The people received this promise by faith when there was little evidence of its fulfillment. It renewed their hope in a good future. This conviction saved them from self-pity in exile and actually got them to re-invest in their conquered land and ruined city. The knowledge of God moved them----as it can move us---to take action against the odds. God is doing a new thing. Do we "know it," even if we can't imagine how it will come to pass?

Generations after Jeremiah, a young rabbi gathered his disciples in an upper room and blessed bread and broke it; blessed wine and invited them to drink. *This cup is the new covenant sealed in my blood, poured out...for the forgiveness of sins.* Friends, in Jesus' life and death we see the fulfillment of God's covenant promises. We are united to God and to one another by a bond of love intrinsic to our very being. Through

Jesus Christ, we know this now by heart. And it changes what we know about everything else. Reality is not only what we can see with our eyes and calculate with our minds and analyze with facts. Reality is also what we glimpse deep in our soul and experience in our heart and discern by faith.

. . .Kinda makes me want to start an ad campaign:
You can know the living God. Now stop worrying and enjoy real life.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

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