

Sermon preached 19 August 2012
Center Church UCC
Hartford, Connecticut
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I Kings 3:3-14

“Help From Above”

Here’s a question for you: how does God help you? In what ways do you feel God’s positive influence in your life? I think there are three basic ways people respond to that all important question, two that really aren’t helpful at all and one that is, that one being illustrated by Solomon’s response to God asking, “What shall I give you?”

One way lots of folks respond to the question “How does God help you?” is “God doesn’t.” They look at the world with all its problems, all the cruel injustices, hurricanes, disease, poverty, drought, war and terror and don’t see how God could let that happen. Or they look to their own individual experience of stress and tragedy and disappointment and conclude that existence is really just a battle, and that any happiness or success to be enjoyed happens because of their own hard work and endurance and a little luck. And, not surprisingly, lots of people who think that way don’t believe in God at all because the cold hard facts of life run counter to a God who cares. And for those who do believe in God sometimes those same cold hard facts can eat away at belief, cause great doubt that God really helps at all. So, one answer to the question, “How does God help you?” from virtually all nonbelievers and a good many believers is “God doesn’t.”

The other response to the question comes from many Christians who answer that God helps them precisely by giving them what they want and need: good health, protection from enemies, wealth and opportunity. For these disciples, physical, material blessings are signs of God’s favor, that they are doing what God wants and God is rewarding them accordingly. Nowadays this perspective is called the “prosperity gospel.” If you’re truly good and faithful, then you will see positive feedback from God in the form of health and wealth. There are obvious difficulties with this perspective: the fact that bad things do in fact happen to good people, and that many people who aren’t healthy or rich have deep faith and vital relationship with God throws the whole scheme off.

How does God help you and me? Well, I don’t think we’d answer that God doesn’t help us at all, nor do I think we’d say that God acts like a kindergarten teacher who always rewards us for good behavior and punishes us for bad. But those ideas do creep into our thinking, especially when prayers for our deepest needs seemingly go unanswered, or when we have a string of bad luck or a season of struggle that doesn’t let up. Haven’t all of us at some point wondered why God isn’t helping us in ways that make a difference? Haven’t we all had moments doubting God? Or don’t we sometimes begin to think we’re being punished for some known or unknown transgression; that we’ve somehow broken the agreement and God is merely dispensing just desserts?

Friends, the fact is we can be our own worst enemies, putting ourselves through days and maybe years of struggle and doubt and disappointment and anger because God doesn't seem to help. But there is another way to see all this, another answer to the question "How does God help you?" Solomon is the new king, and in a dream God comes to him and says what every single one of us wishes God would say to us: "Ask what I should give you." Now Solomon was not a perfect man, in fact he was pretty selfish and egotistical and prone to bending the rules for his own interests. But in a real moment of clarity, Solomon responds wisely. He says when it comes to being king, he's very young, like a child, and that it's a huge job he's not sure he's ready for. With genuine humility, he says to God, "Give your servant, therefore, an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?" That answer pleases God, who replies, "Because you have asked this, and have not asked for yourself long life or riches, or for the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern what is right, I do now according to your word."

The key is that Solomon's prayer was not for himself, but for what mattered most to God—in that instance, the wellbeing of God's people. Could it be that when God doesn't seem to be helping us, when God doesn't seem to answer our prayers, it's less about God and more about our expectations of God? Could it be that we get a little too specific in what we expect God to provide? Those who don't believe in God, or who strongly doubt God, because the world isn't fair—could it be that God is about providing something other than problem-free lives and perfect weather and wealth and health for all? That daily disappointments or personal catastrophes aren't necessarily because God isn't paying attention? And could it be that God's first commitment isn't to what seems to a predictable system of reward and punishment, but to giving us what we and others need most, which may not be what we think we need?

When you or I pray for the healing of a loved one, or for a problem to be resolved, or for peace, sometimes the loved one dies, and the problem gets worse, and peace doesn't happen. If we insist on the solution we think best, of course those will always feel like disappointments. What Solomon did was not ask for concrete results, he asked for a *spirit* of understanding, an *inner* orientation open to whatever God willed, and that is the prayer that God always answers. It is so hard not to be specific about how we want God to help—how could we not earnestly, sincerely, legitimately ask God to heal that wound, let the tumor be benign, stop the war, keep my children safe, make that person stop hurting me. But the unsettling truth is that God is not so much about giving particular, tangible results; God is about providing strength of soul, inner confidence, spiritual endurance to deal with those factual realities. Yes, God does have the power to change factual reality, too, but the Biblical witness and our own experience are pretty clear that God is less a genie granting wishes than the keeper of our hearts and our souls.

Ultimately our prayers, specific though they will continue to be, must be offered knowing that God's response may not be just what we ask for, even when what we ask for is on behalf of another person's well-being. Prayer begins in trust that God knows better than you and me what is truly best, and God's love may find expression in ways we

can't fully comprehend. In Gethsemane, realizing he was about to go to his death, Jesus prayed that he might not have to go through it, that the cup pass from him. But his prayer ended with the same wisdom of Solomon—"not my will, Lord, but thine." It's human nature to hope that God will change our lives from the outside in, by bringing change to circumstances that cause us hurt; Solomon knew, Jesus believed—and we need to learn over and over—that God changes lives from the inside out.

When Harry Truman became President after the death of Franklin Roosevelt, he quoted this same prayer of Solomon and then said, "I ask only to be a good and faithful servant of my Lord and my people." He didn't ask for anything specific—eloquence, good health, universal political support—just to do what mattered most to God—to be a good a faithful servant, whatever form that took. The 11th step in the Alcoholics Anonymous 12 steps is this: "Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood him, praying only for knowledge of his will for us and the power to carry that out."

Sisters and brothers, this may be the hardest lesson for us to learn as followers of Jesus Christ: God does not control outward circumstances, but guides and renews and assures the inner spirit. That truth is too hard for many folks to continue believing in God, but when we can surrender all the situations and circumstances in life to God, turn over the hurts and the outrage, the illnesses and accidents— God promises strength to endure, confidence to make changes where there is injustice, comfort in truly awful moments.

Now there is that other verse in our passage in which God says to Solomon that because he asked for the right thing, "I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor in your life." I don't hear in that God setting up a system whereby you and I always end up getting what we *really* want when we *don't* ask for it in the first place! Rather, I believe that if we look to God to provide nourishment for our souls, strength of heart, inner confidence, if we are willing to accept struggle knowing there will be help from above to get through it, we put ourselves in the best possible position to receive life's blessings—not because there are more of them since we're good, but because we're more able to see them and recognize them and receive them and give thanks for them. God is not our rich uncle who buys our loyalty through presents; God is our loving parent who loves in such a way that we become whole and strong enough to go through whatever life may hold.

For me, this Scripture passage, this sermon, this whole idea about just what kind of help from above God gives, goes back to wisdom first offered to me by my mother's mother when I was in third grade, on the occasion of receiving my first Bible from the church in Stratford; wisdom which continues to be my touchstone for discipleship, faith and ministry. My grandmother gave me a bookmark to go into that Bible, and on it was sewn this admittedly pithy poem: "God hath not promised skies always blue/ Flower strewn pathways, all our lives through/ God hath not promised sun without rain/ Joy without sorrow, peace without pain/ But God hath promised strength for the day/ Rest for

the labour, light for the way/ Grace for the trials, help from above/ Unfailing kindness, undying love.

Friends, I know there is great need for healing and hope in your lives, as there is in mine; needs we faithfully look to God to meet. God does love us, God is with us, God will never leave us. But God may not be meeting our needs by changing our circumstances, as great is our hope; more likely, God is meeting our needs by changing our hearts, strengthening our souls, building our confidence to live with and through those circumstances. The more we will lean on that promise, that wisdom of Solomon, the more real help from above we will receive each day.