

The Problem of God 8-9-09
By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

Exodus 3:13-14

But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

Did you hear the controversy that started this last week in Des Moines (IA) and sparked a debate all across the nation? The ad on the DART buses that traveled the streets of Des Moines for only a short time before the outcry caused them to be taken down read, "Don't believe in God? You're not alone." Even our Governor, Chet Culver weighed in on the matter, saying he "was disturbed personally...by the advertisement," and "can understand why other Iowans were also disturbed by the message that it sent." But there were also many who were outraged that these signs were taken down while ads for churches remained part of the decor. And so, after considering the

issues involved, the advertisements are once again on the buses. "Don't believe in God? You're not alone."

Today I begin a series of sermons about the "problem of God" and the issues raised by the advertisements feel, excuse me for saying, like they were themselves, an act of God. Though I'm sure the Free Thinkers - whose ads are the source of the controversy - would vehemently disagree. But, you see, the thing is, it seems religious people can sometimes get lazy and fall into a lull, or a half-conscious state about what matters. And then something happens that shakes us out of our complacency and makes us think and focus and hone in on what's important and what's not.

The atheists ask the question, "Don't believe in God?" as if that is a simple question with a yes or no answer. Meanwhile, the religious people reacting to that sign may not have much of an idea of just who or what is this God in whom they say they believe. And why should one believe in God? We no longer live in a society where belief in God can be taken for granted. And so, we need to take a closer look at our own

faith and our own assumptions about God to see what is worth hanging on to, and what have we outgrown and how can we engage in intelligent conversation with those who say there is no God and try to bridge the gap of understanding. On one blog I was reading, the writer was trying to defend God from the atheists and asked, "If you don't believe in God, what do you believe in?" After some recent conversations and experiences, I would rather ask, "If you don't believe in God, tell me about the God in whom you don't believe." Or, to those who fill houses of worship in these changing times I might ask, "If you do believe in God, tell me about the God in whom you do believe.

Instead, it seems we have atheists rejecting some notion of God, and religious people accepting some notion of God, but what is actually being rejected or accepted? That is the more important question and that would make interesting dialogue that could lead to understanding. So, you see, that is why it seems as though God either planted the idea of this sermon series to match the controversy or caused the controversy in order to give a context for the sermon series. Either

way, isn't that helpful. Of course, I'm being silly. One of the "problems of God" is whether God intervenes in those kinds of ways and if God does that for me, why not for others. But that is a question for another day.

So when you hear the word "God" what comes to mind? Just what is being defended or denied depending on your perspective? Do you see a very large head of a man with a long white beard in the sky? Do you think of some sort of extra-super super hero? Maybe you see Charlton Heston from his role as Moses in 1956 movie version of The Ten Commandments. Or do you see George Burns smoking a cigar like he did playing God in the 1977 movie, "Oh God!?" Or maybe, if you're a bit more contemporary, you imagine Morgan Freeman who played the role of God in the 2003 movie Bruce Almighty. As children, these kinds of images can be quite helpful because we may just need to see God as that really big adult who loves us and takes care of us whether our family does or not. Although in some churches the big adult can be pretty grouchy, if not downright mean if we cross him... and have you

ever noticed, it's almost always a "him" - the "man upstairs", the "big guy." I recently saw a cartoon using this language. The picture is of a teen or twenty-something male with a CD in his hand by a stereo with huge speakers. There is a staircase in the background with a sign hanging over it that reads... "Feed the poor and turn down the music." The caption under the picture reads, "Bob gets a message from the man upstairs."

At some point in our lives, this notion of *God* as a supernatural being in the sky just may not work for us anymore and if that is the only image available to us, then, of course, *God* may not be believable. Recently, while I was away, I met a man who told me that he didn't believe in *God* anymore. He said when he was 20 he was born again and spent many years doing mission work and going to church. But, he said, "God has never said anything to me. You and I are having a more meaningful conversation than any I've had with *God*." He had become disillusioned. After hearing more of his story, it became clear to me that the *God* he had rejected was the supernatural, super-being,

personified God. And I told him that I thought God was so much more than that. God cannot be contained to one image and certainly not one that is basically a human writ large and more powerful.

Our story from scripture this morning, while, in some ways may perpetuate that "man upstairs" image of God. In other ways, it blows the whole notion apart. At some level, we humans want to know God. And, I think, that is a good impulse. The problem is not so much God as our ability to perceive the nature of God with any degree of completeness or perspective. We are limited by our own experience and context and so we try to fit God into the boxes that make sense to us. And even that is understandable, and not so bad, except when we think that the box is actually God.

Moses had encountered the voice of God in the burning bush. He had taken off his shoes. He had argued with God about his own qualifications, or lack thereof, to be the one to lead the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt. Finally, Moses accepts the task, but he knows the people. They are going to want to know who it is that is supposedly

going to free them from slavery. They are going to want to know specifically the name of the God who can do such a miracle. And so Moses asks, "If they ask, who shall I tell them sent me?" And God responds, "Tell them I AM WHO I AM sent you."

How's that for a vague answer. Some scholars say a better translation of the Hebrew would read, "I will be who I will be." But in either case, it is an answer that leaves much wiggle room and disallows people from pin holing God. This is very important! This is a statement not unlike the sign we had in our church lawn a few years ago that read, "God is Bigger Than" with a slate that we kept filling in with various things. And no matter what we put on the slate, it was always correct. God cannot be put in a box. God is bigger than we can imagine. That's why it is so important that we use lots of images to describe God. The more images we use, the more truth gets revealed. The fewer images, the more the image becomes idolatrous. Just like the Israelites worshipped the golden calf, so we can come to worship a certain image of God in a way that limits the vastness of God and actually closes the

door for some who might otherwise connect. We live in times when belief in God is an option, so we need to be able to allow for the fullness of God to be made known through various images and perspectives. If we view God in narrow ways, God holds less power and sway in the world. If we view God in narrow ways, we view the path to God in narrow ways.

The truth is, any image we use to describe God is metaphorical.

"A metaphor is seeing one thing as something else, pretending "this" is "that" because we do not know how to think or talk about "this," so we use "that" as a way of saying something about it." (Sallie McFague, Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language p.15)

Metaphors help us talk about things and understand things that are difficult to grasp, like God. Metaphors can be like a window through which we can see a truth that would otherwise be hidden. So when we talk about God as a loving parent or a ruler or creator of the universe, those metaphors help us get a glimpse of aspects of God that help us to connect with God, but the metaphors themselves are not God. The

problem with metaphors as I mentioned before is when we get confused and think "this" actually is "that" rather than merely a window that helps us see what is otherwise hidden. Another potential problem with metaphor is that not all metaphors are good metaphors. Some may seem shallow or irrelevant, thus not helping one connect with the one to whom the metaphor should point, like *God*, for instance.

The point is not the metaphor. The point is connecting with *God*. The truth is, no one image can or should capture the nature of *God*. *God* is bigger than that. *God* is the great, "I AM" who will not be put in a box nor contained merely in the minds of humans. *God* is so much more than some supernatural "man upstairs" who manipulates the world to his liking. *God* is the ground of our being, the gardener of our soul, the river of life, the one in whom we live and move and have our being, the force which gives us life and breath, the energy that heals and sustains, the love that breaks down barriers and walls, the grace that bends the universe toward compassion and generosity, the tie that

binds, the source of all goodness and mercy, the rock, the shepherd, the mother hen, ... and still our understanding is only vague at best.

The problem of God is one worth considering. And that is what we shall do for the next 4 weeks. God needs to be freed from the confines of our own making so that more people can connect to the source of love and life. The problem of God is a human one. The burden for allowing God to be God is not the burden of the atheists. It is the challenge and passion of those who believe the world will find healing and wholeness as it sees and knows and experiences and connects with the great, I AM. These are exciting times in which to be church. May we open our hearts and minds and spirits to infinite possibility of God. Amen.

Googling God: The Search for Meaning 8-16-09

By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

Matthew 2:1-12

2In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.' ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶"And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel." '

7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.' ⁹When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to

Have you ever googled God? If you do, you come up with 468,000,000 hits. In some ways, it seems like that number should be larger. In other ways, it seems like how could you ever find what you are looking for in that sea of information links.

I remember when we first got internet at home. The year was 1995 and it was time to get a new computer. The one Tim and I had for the previous decade was kind of a dinosaur. There was no hard drive. It operated using DOS and two 5 $\frac{1}{2}$ " floppy disks - one with the program and one to store data. In 1995 we bought a computer with a hard drive and the brand new Windows '95 operating system, AND we got internet. At that time, we paid AOL \$9.95 a month for 5 hours of internet access. And when you went over, it was \$2.95 for each additional hour. Can you believe that? That was just 14 years ago.

The internet has changed the world in an amazingly short time. We can communicate with people all over the world. We now have instant access to all kinds of information. We can search for anything. What used to be just the name of an internet search engine is now a

verb. I'm referring, of course, to "google." You can google any subject and get instant answers, stories, recipes, formulas, remedies, definitions... you name it. Just google it! When my son, Sam started going out with a young woman in college and we wanted to find out about her parents, guess what... we were able to google them. When I was at a reunion with some high school friends and we were trying to track down some of our other classmates, guess what... we googled them and were able to communicate with many we had not seen or heard from in years. We live in an age of easy access to information; a time of quick searches. And yet, while information is rampant, answers, especially to life's important questions, are still difficult to come by. In the middle of technological advances and scientific breakthroughs, we humans are still searching for meaning and purpose and connection. We are searching beyond ourselves and what we can see in front of us and wondering about the bigger picture and how we fit into it.

The search for meaning is age-old. We humans have been searching as long as we've been around. There's a sense in which we have a hole inside us that we are trying to fill and we keep looking and trying new things. Advertisers know this all too well and tap into that longing; that desire; that emptiness by offering to sell us things they claim will satisfy. Whether it's face cream or stain remover, an iPhone or a car, there is always someone willing to sell us something in order to fill the empty place, the place of longing within our souls. But of course we know, at least on some level, that those things, as nice as they may be, don't satisfy the longing of our soul. They don't connect us to the deeper meaning of our existence. They don't answer life's important questions about purpose.

Have you ever had one of those moments of existential angst? You know, when your defenses are down for some reason and you find yourself asking, "what is the meaning of life" or "why am I here" or "is there more to life than this." These are moments when you are keenly aware of the empty place within yourself. I certainly have had many

such moments in my life. Sometimes they leave as quickly as they come. Sometime those thoughts stay for awhile. But this I know, it is precisely those moments that have deepened my faith more than anything else. In the middle of those big questions; in the middle of the discomfort that comes with the questions; our hearts and minds and spirits begin to search in ways we don't "normally" search and we are open to finding answers in places we'd normally not look.

In our story from scripture this morning, we hear of ones who were searching. Matthew speaks of wise men from the east who came to Jerusalem following a star. These wise men from the east were foreigners searching to connect with something beyond the world they knew and so they took off on a journey which landed them far from home among people they did not know and it was in that new context that they connected with *God* and with the deeper meaning of existence - that *God* would be born in us and live through us - that is an amazing thing to behold. That message is so important. We search the world for meaning, for *God*, for connection beyond ourselves... and the

story of Jesus' birth brings it right back home again. God is with us. God is born in us. In his letter to the early church, John says that "everyone who loves is born of God and knows God, ... for God is love... and if we love one another, God lives in us..."

That search for meaning isn't about us, but it is within us. Like in the Wizard of Oz when Dorothy discovers that she always had the power to get herself home... but she needed the journey in order to discover that. Early church father, St. Augustine, put it this way, "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you, O God." The answer to the search for meaning is both within us and beyond us. It is in the question as well as in the journey to find an answer.

We come to worship because we, like the wise men of old, are searching for something that is beyond ourselves, something that gives meaning and purpose to life, something that animates life and gives hope to the future. We come to worship to tap into that which helps fill the empty place in our soul and heal the brokenness we experience in our lives. The thing about googling God is we can find 468,000,000

places that may talk about God, and we may learn a whole bunch of stuff, some of which would be complete and utter bogus, some of which would be interesting, some of which would be inspiring, but what we really need is connection and like the wise men and Dorothy we need the journey that takes us outside ourselves in order to discover that God is within us and between us, in the love we share and the care we give, in the questions we ask, in listening to another, in struggling to understand, in being swept up in the mystery of it all.

We go in search of answers to life's important questions. And it is good to be on that journey seeking truth. But an important part of the truth we seek is right in front of us if only we have eyes to see. Part of our hunger, part of the emptiness we feel, can be satisfied by being in tune with what is all around. There is Jewish story of an old rabbi who once asked his pupils, "How can you tell the night has ended and the day has begun?"

"Could it be," asked one student, "when you can see an animal in the distance and tell whether it's a sheep or a dog?"

"No," answered the rabbi.

Another asked, "Is it when you can look at a tree in the distance and tell whether it's a fig tree or a peach tree?"

"No," answered the rabbi.

"Then when is it?" the pupils demanded.

"You know the night has ended and the day has begun when you can look on the face of any woman or man and see that it is your sister or brother. Because if you cannot see this, it is still night."

The wise men were seeking God's presence and glory and majesty. They followed the light of a star and found a small child of humble background, and in that small package God's love was revealed; a love that is right here within us and that we can see around us; a love that shines through the darkness and thus begins the day and a new creation. May we follow where the light leads us, and share the journey together. Amen.

The Problem of God: God and Science 8-23-09

By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

Genesis 1:1 - 2:3

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was chaos, and there was darkness over the abyss, and the spirit of God hovered upon the waters. And God said, "Let there be light." And there was light. And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening, and there was morning; a first day.

And God said, "Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, to separate waters from waters." And it was so: God made the dome, and it separated the waters below it from the waters above it. And God saw that it was good. And God called the dome Sky. And there was evening, and there was morning: a second day.

And God said, "Let the waters below the sky gather into one place, and let the dry land appear." And it was so. And God called the dry land Earth, and the gathered waters he called Sea. And God saw that it was good. And God said, "Let the earth sprout with green things: plants that bear seeds, and every kind of tree that bears fruit with its seed in it." And it was so: the earth became green with plants and with every kind of fruit tree. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening, and there was morning: a third day.

And God said, "Let there be lights in the dome of the sky, to separate the day from the night. And let them shine on the earth, and mark the set times, the days and the years." And it was so: God made the two great lights – the greater one to rule the day, and the lesser one to rule the night – and also the stars. And God set them in the dome of the sky to shine on the earth, and to rule the day and the night, and to separate the light from the darkness. And God saw that it was good. And there was evening, and there was morning: a fourth day.

And God said, "Let the waters teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky." And it was so: God created the great whales, and every kind of creature that the waters teem with, and every kind of bird. And God saw that it was good. And God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the waters of the sea, and let the birds multiply on the earth." And there was evening, and there was morning: a fifth day.

And God said, "Let the earth bring forth living things of all kinds – animals and reptiles and every kind of creature." And it was so: God made animals of all kinds, and every kind of reptile, and every kind of creature. And God saw that it was good. And God said, "Let us make humans, in our own image, similar to us; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the sky and the animals and the reptiles and every creature on the earth." And God created humans in his own image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them. And God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and govern it, and rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the sky and every creature on earth." And God said, "Here: I give you every plant that bears seeds and every tree that bears fruit; they will be your food." And God saw everything that he had made, and indeed it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning: the sixth day.

Thus the heavens and the earth were completed, and everything in them. And on the seventh day God saw that his work was completed, and he rested on the seventh day from all work that he had done. And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy because on it he rested

God of Concrete Words: Frederick R.C. Clarke and Richard Granville Jones

God of concrete, God of steel,
God of piston and of wheel,
God of pylon, God of steam,
God of girder and of beam,
God of atom, God of mine:
all the world of power is thine.

Lord of cable, Lord of rail,
Lord of freeway and of mail,
Lord of rocket and of flight,
Lord of soaring satellite,

Lord of lightning's flashing line:
all the world of speed is thine.

Lord of science, Lord of art,
Lord of map and graph and chart,
Lord of physics and research,
Word of Bible, Faith of church,
Lord of sequence and design:
all the world of truth is thine.

God whose glory fills the earth,
gave the universe its birth,
loosed the Christ with Easter's might,
saves the world from evil's blight,
claims us all by grace divine:
all the world of love is thine.

I remember when I was a young adult, recently graduated from college, and working in Iowa City. I was a member of First Christian Church there in Iowa City and went to a workshop where they brought in some expert from the University of Iowa. I don't remember much about that workshop. I don't know what the person was an expert in. I only remember one thing - the speaker put up a graph showing that the rate of technological advancement was going to grow exponentially and that, said this expert, would cause a bit of a crisis because change would happen faster than our human ability to process and integrate the changes. That was nearly twenty five years ago. I think that

expert knew what he was talking about. We have been caught in a whirlwind of change and it is easy to feel dizzy trying to keep up.

A week or so ago, some of us went down to Des Moines to see the Whirling Dervishes of Rumi. The Whirling Dervishes are an order of religious Muslims from Turkey who, as part of their service of prayer, spin around so that they might join with the universe and life as it revolves. Afterward we were trying to imagine how they could spin for such an extended period of time without losing their balance or stumbling. It was quite amazing. Each of us had been told at one point in our lives that if you have one focal point as you spin around, it'll keep you from getting dizzy. If the Whirling Dervishes used that technique, it was not obvious to any of us! But then again, maybe they didn't need that kind of trick since they were whirling in order to be more grounded and in rhythm with life itself.

When we are spinning, we need something to keep us centered. We need some handle or focus to keep us from falling. From the turn of the last century until now, we have been spinning with change and

the speed has increased and we are all probably looking for some handle or focal point to keep us from falling over. I can't help but think that is one of the reasons it seems there is such division in our society right now. Things are changing faster than we can comprehend or integrate or process and so we are looking for something to ground us, something to keep us from falling. For some that is religion. For some that is science. And I'm sure there are other things as well, but for today I want us to think about those two endeavors.

In some ways, science and religion have always been in tension with one another. Think of Copernicus and Galileo, for example. Galileo took up Copernicus' work of discovering that the earth was not the center of the universe and that the earth rotated around the sun. The religious authorities of Galileo's day decided he'd better keep that to himself because it didn't match the perspective of the Bible. So Galileo was drug before the papal court. He was found suspect of heresy and put under house arrest for about 10 years until he died. Galileo, according to Albert Einstein, was the father of modern

science. And he was finally vindicated when, in 1992, Pope John Paul II expressed regret for how Galileo was treated by the church and conceded that the earth was not stationary.

But while the Vatican was apologizing for past wrongs, other religious leaders were promoting the view that science was opposed to religion. And some scientists were taking the bait and agreeing that science and religion are mutually exclusive endeavors. Just as some were using the Bible as a science book, others were holding on to the idea of truth as only that which can be proven or quantified. And so there has been much discussion and debate. Some see religion as the enemy. Some see science as Godless and, therefore, the enemy. But I want us to consider here, that science and religion are compatible; that science and the endeavor to know more and to discover and explore and test and experiment can actually increase one's appreciation for and faith in the God of mystery and wonder; the God of life and love; the energy and force for good and beauty in the world we know.

One of my favorite quotes is from Galileo himself. He once said, "I do not feel obliged to believe that the same God who has endowed us with sense, reason and intellect has intended us to forgo their use." Here at First Christian Church we say, "You don't have to check your brain at the door." Here we believe God gave us the ability to think and explore and wonder and question and that as we explore and experiment; as we hypothesize and imagine, rather than losing faith, we actually open the door to the awe and wonder of mystery and a vast creation that is both known and beyond knowing. We can hear the beautiful poetry of the creation story in Genesis and see that the truth of that story is in what it says about the goodness of creation as well as the privilege and responsibility we bear as ones created in God's image... that makes us co-creators with God. We can accept the science of evolution and believe in God as the source of life.

Actually, there are many who believe that science and religion are not so different. Both stem from the fundamental human desire to understand the world and to derive some meaning from existence.

Both science and religion use metaphors and models to assess, understand, and communicate things about the world that are hard to grasp. Both involve experience and logic and faith. You may wonder if science involves faith, but all scientific endeavors begin with certain suppositions that give direction and meaning to the work. And both science and religion rely on authority and trust. Scientists rely on the authority of the body of work of other scientists and those who review and interpret that work. In religion, there is authority and trust placed in leaders and interpreters of sacred texts and of tradition. Not everyone who places trust in the Bible has read the whole thing. We all rely, to some extent, upon those we see as trusted scholars and interpreters as we seek to discover meaning and find answers to life's challenging questions.

One difference between science and religion is that science tends to focus on the world we know as real. Scientific inquiry tends to cover processes and how they work and how they might work in the future or on technological innovation in order to make life better. Religion, on

the other hand, tends to deal with values such as what is good or bad, or beautiful, or meaningful. Science can push religion to see things in new ways and religion, can likewise be a check on how science is being used within society, asking important questions about the meaning and consequences of scientific findings.

As humans, we go through different stages of knowing and understanding. When we are young we believe certain things to be literally true. As we grow older, we begin to question. Maybe we start asking how it is that one man can make it around the world in one night, not to mention how he could get down the chimney or how reindeer can fly. At some point our rational self begins to reject things we believed when we were younger. That is just part of development. Then we go through a stage where everything must have a rational answer. If we can't understand it, then it must not be true. During this period, we take ourselves and our ability to know very seriously, and we often overestimate our own ability to know and understand. Then, hopefully at some point, we start to see that our ability to know is finite and we

begin to give in to the mystery of life. Not that we give up our endeavor to understand and figure things out, but we begin to realize that there are ways of knowing that are beyond our comprehension - at least at the moment. There is truth beyond what we can quantify, beyond the literal facts or stories or interpretations. We begin to see that truth is not found in trying to believe something that is unbelievable, or in rejecting something simply because it is not quantifiable, but looking deeper to the larger truth revealed. That is where we find God.

We find ourselves in an amazing period of history. We are spinning as change happens at an ever increasing pace. Rather than digging our heels in and thinking we need to have THE ANSWERS, maybe what we really need is to find the rhythm of life in creation and, like the Whirling Dervishes, release ourselves to spin held up by the ground of our being, the force that is beyond knowing fully, the one whom we come to worship. Amen.

God and Pluralism 8-30-09

By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

Luke 10:25-37 The Parable of the Good Samaritan

25 Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. 'Teacher,' he said, 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' 26 He said to him, 'What is written in the law? What do you read there?' 27 He answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself.' 28 And he said to him, 'You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.'

29 But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbour?' 30 Jesus replied, 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. 31 Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. 32 So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a Samaritan while travelling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. 34 He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. 35 The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, "Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend." 36 Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' 37 He said, 'The one who showed him mercy.' Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'

When I was growing up, the question I'd hear people ask was, "Where were you when Kennedy was assassinated?" About eight years ago, that question changed. Now we ask, "Where were you on 9/11?" I remember the day very well. I was at a minister's retreat. That was

long enough ago that there were very few pastors with cell phones. We were at a camp and away from the media. But then came a call from a family member. They had just seen the footage on TV. There wasn't a lot of information, but there, in that room full of ministers we stopped what we were doing, bowed our heads and prayed. The day the twin towers in New York City went down; the day we watched the terrible footage of the collapse realizing that there were thousands of people who didn't get out; the day this country was no longer out of reach; was a day that our world changed. And in the aftermath of that terrible tragedy we woke up to an enlivened discussion about religion and people and how it all makes sense, or doesn't.

On the one hand, there was irrational, fear-based reactions like happened on many campuses where international students were subject to hateful words, and in some cases, even violent attacks. On the other hand, there were people who understood that religion was not the enemy and did not cause 9/11. Rather, it was the way some - namely Al Qaida - used religion as a weapon. And so, organizations like the Iowa

Dialog Center were born as a way to promote relationships and understanding between people of different religions.

I remember how, not long after I came to First Christian Church, there were a few young men who came to worship late one Sunday and sat in the back. After worship, they spoke with David Digby and I about their desire, as Muslims, to be friends with this congregation. As an expression of their friendship, they wanted to give us a gift. If you were around back then, maybe you remember one Sunday following worship receiving a small cup of "Noah" pudding as a way to celebrate a part of our heritage that is shared. You see, Abraham is the father of Muslims, Jews and Christians. That is a place of connection. Honoring that connection was there in the simple act of giving and receiving that pudding.

Our friendship has continued, and last spring, many of us gathered in the parlor with many of those Muslims from the Iowa Dialog Center. They taught us about Islam and we taught them about Christianity. After each session, we stayed and talked while these

Muslims went up to our bell tower room to pray as is there custom several times a day. Then, last fall, they treated us and other friends to a feast held right here. We sat at tables in our fellowship hall and found out about their lives and they about ours. We met husbands and wives and children, all seeking to be faithful to God; all realizing that they bring honor to God when they honor and respect those other than themselves, also created in God's image.

In the congregation I served before coming here, I had two significant experiences with Muslims in rural Iowa. There were two families in the area who were Muslim. One family was from Kosovo, the other from Iraq. The family from Kosovo was a mother and her teenage son. As they fled their home during a violent attack, sniper fire hit and killed her younger son and they never saw him again. That poor woman had to focus on keeping her older son safe. Once they got to Iowa and found a safe place to live, the reality of what had happened started to hit. And so, two years after this tragic event, the Christian community who had embraced this Muslim woman and her son,

held a memorial service for the son who was killed. We had a table with his picture and other mementos and we said words of comfort and care and spoke of God's love and grieved with this woman who was now our friend, and her son, whom we all loved and claimed as our own.

Then we did the same thing for the mother of the Iraqi family, who found out sometime after the fact, that both her brother and her sister had been executed in Iraq during Saddam Hussein's rule. Here she was, far from her home, not knowing much about the circumstances, and with no way to find closure. The church surrounded this woman and her family. We had her bring items that symbolized her brother and sister and put them on a table for people to see as a way of making them real to us all. We acknowledged her grief and we prayed to God that she be strengthened and comforted, and that she might one day find healing and peace.

Some might question a Christian Church doing memorial services for Muslims. But the truth is, we did it precisely because we are Christians and we follow the one who told the parable of the Good

Samaritan. Jesus says the bottom line is to love God and your neighbor as yourself. And your neighbor is basically anyone created in God's image. Your neighbor is anyone whom God loves. And you are a neighbor when you put aside your dogmas and your doctrines and meet the other with love and compassion and grace. Even though we were of different religions, we were family and we loved and respected one another in the name of God. That is the story of the Good Samaritan who put compassion before rules and doctrines. The story of the Good Samaritan is about faith that is alive rather than just on paper or in one's head... it is faith of the heart that matters here and now and demands we give of ourselves for the sake of another to make real God's abundant love.

If you haven't noticed, the world is in trouble. And it needs a good dose of God's grace to keep us from destroying ourselves and the planet. As long as the religions focus on the differences between us rather than our common ground, there is little hope. In fact, look around, that is, in part, what has gotten us into the mess we're in. The

news is filled with conflict between Muslims and Jews in one region and Christians and Muslims in another. But there are other stories as well. If you listen carefully, you will find stories of Muslims hiding Jews from Christians or Christians helping Muslims or Jews in a time of need. These stories are stories on the ground where one person helps another out of a deep sense about what is right... a deep sense of loving neighbor as oneself... a deep grasp of "when you do it to the least of these, you do it to me."

What would happen if people of all religions, not in spite of, but because of who God has called them to be, out of a common love for God and neighbor, decided to cooperate and make a positive difference in the world? The truth is, there are people doing just that. Eboo Patel is a Muslim Rhodes Scholar at Oxford who realized that religions would either be a source of conflict or a source of cooperation. He thought it was more honoring of God to cooperate than to destroy, so he started an organization in Chicago called the Interfaith Youth Core whose goal is to build mutual respect and

pluralism among young people from different religious traditions by empowering them to work together to serve others.

I heard Eboo Patel in an interview and what he said struck a deep chord. He said that young people want to impact the world. And, he said, the largest, most successful youth organization in the world that understands this, and taps into this impulse is Al Qaida. They have been very successful at reaching that part of people that want their life to stand for something and to make a difference in the world. Unfortunately, their impact is destruction. Patel suggests that if the religions of the world could come together and tap into that deep religious impulse and celebrate it, they could channel it for good, for the sake of the world. That would be a great alternative to the likes of Al Qaida. He suggests that rather than competing, religions can cooperate as we love and serve God and humanity. *The Interfaith Youth Core* is one expression of a better way. It "aims to introduce a new relationship, one that is about mutual respect and religious pluralism. Instead of focusing a dialogue on political or theological differences, [they] build relationships on the values that [different religions] share, such as hospitality and caring for the Earth, and how we can live out those values together to

contribute to the betterment of our community.”

http://ifyc.org/about_core That sounds a lot like loving God and your neighbor as yourself, doesn't it?

The truth is, we worship a God who is bigger than religion. And we believe and we trust that God created all humans in God's likeness and pronounced us good. The truth is, we do find meaning and hope in our faith as Christians, and we can fully claim that and, at the same time, make room for those who have found God through a different path. The one we follow, the one for whom Muslims have great respect, says that the bottom line is in how we treat people. In the end, we will not be judged on what we say we believe or if we got in with the right crowd. We will be judged on whether we extended compassion and love to our neighbor. And because of Jesus, we know who that is. We have an incredible opportunity to help tear down the dividing walls between people which is what Jesus' life and death was all about. Now is the time to live our faith on the ground as we care and share and serve with others for the sake of all and to the glory of God. Amen.

**Meltdown: What Happens When Everything You Thought
No Longer Makes Sense? 9-6-09**
By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

Psalm 137

¹By the rivers of Babylon— there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion.

²On the willows there we hung up our harps.

³For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"

⁴How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?

⁵If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither!

⁶Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.

⁷Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem's fall, how they said, "Tear it down! Tear it down! Down to its foundations!"

⁸O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us!

⁹Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!

Preparing for the Message

Change

Tracy Chapman

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=drXwsVYrd20>

It begins the moment we are born. We don't remember it, but we were all snug in our mother's womb, in that dark, warm, fully-equipped

world without a care. Then it happens. Change. We can't stay there. Without our consent, we are born into a different world. It is bright and cold and now we have to develop new skills and adapt to our new environment. We have to use our mouth in order to get food. We make messes in our pants and get uncomfortable. What happened? Everything we knew changed. And that is just the beginning of a journey through life where things happen beyond our control that change our world and cause us to grieve or suffer or become disoriented.

We adjust to our new world and the way things work and the language and the expectations and the routines and then something else happens. Our family moves to a new house or community; our parents get divorced; our beloved pet dies; a sibling become very ill; our community is hit by a tornado; our school experiences a tragedy such as a shooting or a suicide. And the foundation feels like it is shaking and what we thought we knew, what we took for granted, all of a sudden becomes a question.

We make it through those situations... we get on the other side of the tragedy or loss... we adjust and find ways to cope or new ways to be, only to be met by more suffering and loss and a sense in which things are out of our control even as adults. Things happen which shake the foundations and which bring suffering and loss and change that we did not choose, like being robbed or assaulted; or when the one who made a vow to love us degrades us and hits us or our children; or we have a child who dies; or our home burns to the ground; or a loved one gets cancer; or a spouse is unfaithful; or we lose the use of our body in some way; or we must face a move from the home we have known for the last 50 years.

One natural response when tragedy strikes is to try to figure out why it happened. "Why me?" "What did I do?" That is a question that has been asked through the ages. Some tragedy may be the consequence of something a person has done - like leaving an old worn-out heater plugged in while you're away, which then creates a spark which ignites a fire that burns down the house. But so often, it is not

that. Things happen. Both good surprises that enhance our lives and that we don't necessarily deserve as well as tragedy that causes pain and suffering and that we also don't deserve. The entire book of Job in the Old Testament of the Bible is about how bad things keep happening to an upright and blameless man. Job's friends insist he must have done something wrong or he wouldn't be suffering so, but, in the end, Job is vindicated. Jesus, too, says God causes the sun to shine and the rain to fall on the good and the bad alike. Things happen that are not fair, that are tragic, that involve innocent suffering, that there are no easy answers to explain away, and that change our world.

There is another question commonly asked when tragedy strikes... and this question can really create a crisis of faith, and in fact, is the crux of some arguments against the existence of God. That question is, "If God is all loving and all powerful, how can God let innocent people suffer?" This is an important question. Some people respond by saying that God's ways are mysterious to us and we simply cannot comprehend the wisdom of God. Some think God uses tragedy to test us and build

our faith. But for some, that just isn't enough of an answer. This big question requires a big answer and deep wisdom and some way to get beyond the flaw in logic.

I'm not going to pretend that I have the answer to that large and looming question. The question of God and suffering is one that will be with us and we will sit with and explore and experience and struggle with. And that is alright because we will learn much in the asking and in the search for an answer. But I do want to share a couple of claims I would make. One - I don't believe that God causes the suffering and the tragedy that befalls us. I don't think God wills that the innocent should suffer. And two - I do believe that God is the foundation that is still standing and holding us up when the world around us is crumbling and we don't recognize where we are or what we do now.

The Psalmist was expressing the pain and struggle of having their world change and the disorientation that comes with that. In 587 BCE Jerusalem was burned and the temple destroyed. The king was exiled and the good citizens were deported. Biblical scholar, Walter

Brueggeman writes, "It was the end of life with God, which Israel had taken for granted." "How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" (Ps.137:4) They were strangers in a strange land. Nothing made sense anymore. So the question became, where is God in this place?

Twentieth century Neurologist and Psychiatrist, Viktor Frankl, wrote the book, "Man's Search for Meaning" about his experience as an inmate in a Nazi concentration camp for 3 years. There, he developed suicide watches and ways to help his fellow inmates cope in their new and tragic world clearly outside their control. Frankl says he wrote the book because he wanted to convey to the reader "by way of concrete example that life holds a potential meaning under any conditions, even the most miserable ones." He thought that the extreme conditions of the concentration camp would speak deeply and be helpful to those who are prone to despair. As he experienced and observed those in the concentration camps, he learned that if, as Nietzsche said, a person has a "why" for life, they can bear almost any *how*." Frankl also observed that there are some things that cannot be taken away. When

the foundations crumble, there can be something left standing even in an extreme situation such as the Nazi Concentration camps. One of Frankl's famous quotes is: "We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that **everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.**"

Love and compassion are the foundation of those whose world crumbled around them as what they thought they knew about life and humanity was challenged to the core. Instead of becoming bitter or despondent they found meaning in living through giving to and caring for others. Surely that is where God was found. In giving of that piece of bread or that expression of comfort, God's presence was made real and alive, and the power of God's love in the midst of terrible suffering and pain took on human form.

The truth is, people tend to deal with tragedy and suffering and pain in a couple of different ways. Some cling to the pain and get caught in the snare of feeling cheated or wronged or disappointed and they become bitter. They literally get stuck precisely in the suffering and pain. Others decide to move beyond those feelings in order not to give in to them; in order to claim some sense of power and worth and possibility. Later in his life, Frankl wrote, "When we are no longer able to change a situation - just think of an incurable disease such as inoperable cancer - we are challenged to change ourselves." And as we change, we have the opportunity to open ourselves up to the power of God's love and partner with God in sharing that and making a difference in the world, no matter how different that world is from what we thought we knew, no matter what we have suffered and lost. That is where God is found. That is the foundation for hope and possibility.

Some Christian leaders suggest that the biblical notion of exile is where the church in the US finds itself today. I may be hard to grasp that notion because we haven't physically moved. Rather, society and

culture around us has changed dramatically. There are many here who can remember 50 years ago when society privileged the church.

Sunday was set aside as the day of worship. It was just assumed that anyone who was anyone was in church on Sunday morning, and from what I hear, the sanctuary was full and there were even people sitting in the balcony. But we no longer live in that world. And while there may be comfort in that memory, hope comes from living in the world with beauty and grace and love and compassion. God is found in the acts of love, the expressions of hope that transform this world and touch the lives of those here and now building on the foundation that really is eternal, the foundation that was there from the beginning and will continue without end. It is not a building made of stone. It is not the particular songs that we sing. It is not the clothes we wear.

Rather, it is the love we share.

"No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that rock I'm clinging. Since love is lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing." Amen.