

## SUFFERING AND SCIENCE Feb. 8, 2009

Isa. 40.21-31

Mark 1.29-39

Sometimes the Scripture bore us, sometimes it confuses us, and sometimes we are amused or inspired. Sometimes, we feel God speaking right to our hearts and lives. This text from Isaiah really connects to my reality. When I was about 11 years old, my mother took me and my brothers ages 8 and 7 to get our polio vaccines. My brothers were whimpering about how scared they were. I said—be brave. It won't be that bad. I'll show you. I'll go first. The doctor gives the shot—and I pass out and collapse on the floor.

Giving blood in college I fainted once before I gave and then once after. So when the text speaks about God giving power to the faint, I say Hallelujah—thank you Jesus for coming to my rescue—for reviving me and calling me back to life and consciousness.

This text from Isaiah resonates with the story of the healing of Peter's mother in law. Peter's mother in law is healed of her fever when Jesus takes her by the hand and lifts her up. Precious Lord, take my hand. Jesus, call me by name. I want you to know who I am—I want you to call me, and hold me and lift me up that I might be made whole. At the close of the worship service, one of the Caring ministers and Linda and I will stand at the communion table. If you would like to be prayed for by name, come forward. Perhaps you would like prayers for a loved one or for ice storm victims in Kentucky or homeless people in Gaza. We will ask you what you would like to have prayed for today and then Linda or I will offer a prayer for you and for the burden of your heart. If you would like to be anointed with oil, that ancient symbol of blessing, then approach the caring minister and indicate whether you prefer to be anointed on the forehead or on your palm. We bless one another with our prayers, our love, our claiming the gifts of God's healing power coming into us.

Let us pray.

Dick McKenna was an extraordinary biology teacher at North Plainfield High School. He was scheduled to have spinal surgery that involved fusing several vertebrae. Fairly dicey stuff. When I visited him in the hospital, we began talking about evolution. He said that he knew teaching evolution was contrary to the Scriptures, but he believed in evolution and felt called to teach it. I felt blessed by the opportunity to talk about the Scriptures and the two creation stories and the way the first told an amazingly accurate story of the creation of the earth out of the watery chaos, the emergence of life and the eventual emergence of the human being. We then talked about how the second creation story was in fact the story of the birth of moral consciousness, the knowledge of good and evil.

Yes, evil, the power of the demons was real as it is real in the story of Jesus casting out those demons. But clearly thanks be to God for the birth of moral consciousness and therefore, of course, to Eve as the mother of moral consciousness—at least according to the Scripture.

My friend Dick had never heard of Teilhard de Chardin, the paleontologist /mystic theologian who embraced fully the mystery of the earth, who believed in the truth of rocks and all that rocks revealed and who believed in and experienced Christ present in the evolving universe. Teilhard wrote `If as a result of some interior revolution, I were successfully to lose my faith in Christ, my faith in a personal God, my faith in the Spirit, I think that I would still continue to believe in the world.' Teilhard died in the mid fifties. Thomas Berry one of his interpreters and the author of *Dream of the Earth* said in the spirit of Teilhard, `The earth is the only thing we know for sure.`

Being a scientist, a biologist like my friend Dick McKenna, doesn't mean that one is automatically religious or irreligious. Certainly, in Isaiah's image we can look into the heavens stretched out and for those with eyes of faith we can see the mystery of God. At the same time, as we study the universe with our mind and we learn from the universe, we know those learnings shape our understanding of faith, of our sense of what God is doing in the universe. Teilhard said that evolution is so true and so glorious that it is the arc to which all our thought must conform. As a scientist he rejoiced in the truths that the rocks spoke—as a Christian, he rejoiced in the truth spoken by and through the Rock of Ages.

When I was in the last year of high school, I decided that I was no longer comfortable calling myself a Christian, based on my understanding of the Christian story. At the time I rebelled intellectually against Christianity for two reasons--Suffering and Science. There was no explanation as to why a loving all powerful God would allow such suffering in the world, so God must not exist I thought. And like Dick McKenna and many in our culture I had come to believe that one had to choose between religion and science, between creation in 4004BC and evolution.

In Copenhagen, Gail and I visited an incredible church built I think in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. The church proper was on the bottom floor. The inclined walkway led to a second floor that housed a library. The third floor was an observatory.

At the General Assembly last June, I was standing in line to buy breakfast and wandered into conversation with a delegate who was a professor emeritus of physics from Stanford. After a little chatter about upcoming GA business, we started in on religion and science. Born in Switzerland, a life long church goer, he was currently involved in a research project to discover what happened to the anti-matter that is present somewhere in the universe. With my 45 year old memories of high school physics class fading a little bit, I listened intently and humbly. He explained how the universe contained as much anti matter as matter. Ok—whatever you say. And I thought—by God I am proud to be a Presbyterian. One of our national organizations passionately explores issues of Faith, Science and Technology.

Science challenges theology—and too theology challenges and informs, but hopefully does not distort science. There is the possibility of a blessed partnership. Again, Teilhard blesses us.

“Throughout my life, through my life, the world has little by little caught fire in my sight until, aflame all around me, it has become almost completely luminous from within...Such has been my experience in contact with the earth—the diaphany of the divine at the heart of the universe on fire...Christ: His heart: a fire: capable of penetrating everywhere and gradually spreading everywhere.”