

“What Was I Thinking!?”

... let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts;
Isaiah 55:7a

It was the start of a new term in hell and the devil was giving an induction course to the latest batch of apprentices. “There’s no room for complacency,” he warned them. ‘You wouldn’t believe the half of what is going on down on earth. People are getting more and more in touch with God. They are starting to see God in creation, and even in each other’s hearts. They are noticing God’s action in the stories of their own lives. And worse than that, they are starting to realize how important it is to work for justice and for peace. If things carry on like this, God’s kingdom will come and we’ll be out of a job. There was a long silence, as the seriousness of the devil’s message sank in. The apprentices waited to hear what wisdom the devil would give them for dealing with this perilous situation down on earth. But he could read the questions in their minds, and he turned the whole problem over to them. ‘So what are you going to do about it?’ he asked them. ‘Any bright ideas?’ They scratched their heads and furrowed their brows. ‘Come on,’ urged the devil. ‘I’m waiting. We don’t have forever, you know!’ Very tentatively, the first apprentice raised his arm. ‘Sir,’ he ventured, ‘why don’t we go down there and tell them there’s no God?’ ‘Sorry to disappoint you,’ the devil said. ‘But that wouldn’t wash at all. They seem to be born with something deep in their hearts that attracts them back to God. They often can’t name it, or even admit that it is there, but sooner or later, they all have a moment when they know that God exists. You’ll have to come up with a better idea than that.’ Crestfallen, the first apprentice sat down, and the second apprentice raised his arm. ‘Sir,’ he suggested, ‘could we perhaps go down there and tell them that there is no such thing as sin, and so they have nothing to fear. Hell is just a myth?’ ‘A good try,’ said the devil, ‘but unfortunately, the same bit of God that is deep in their hearts also tells them when they are going off course. They know—if they stop to listen to that inner voice—that it is all too possible to commit sin, and they know

that, when they do, they can feel so terrible afterwards, until they have put things right again. Deep in their hearts, they know what sin is and how 'hell' feels. Think again. 'What about?' he said, turning to the third apprentice. 'What have you got to say for yourself?' 'Well,' replied the third apprentice, slowly and thoughtfully. 'I've been giving it a lot of thought. You say that it's no good us telling them that there is no God. And it's no use our telling them that there is no sin. How would it be if we told them that there is no hurry?' The devil was delighted. 'Brilliant!' he squealed. 'That's exactly what we'll do. You'll go far, young demon. Well done. And so it came to be that the human race carried on believing in God and knowing about sin, but never doing much about it, because, after all, there was no hurry (One Hundred Wisdom Stories from Around the World by Margaret Silf, p. 106-107).

That's what it was like for some of the children of Israel who were in no hurry to go back home. In their attempts to survive and thrive in captivity, Jews made anxious peace with an empire that *imposed, what Walter Brueggemann calls a 'pseudo-order' on their lives. They gave their lives over to imperial productivity* (Texts Under Negotiation). *They became trapped into thinking that their worth was equated with their productivity. They bought into the idea that a dollar amount can be assigned to a person's value-- net worth* (UCC Daily Devotional, 3/1/10). In their adoption of this worldview, they stopped turning to God to ask what the Almighty thought about these things. Isaiah confronted their sin by asking them the question: Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? (Is. 55:2). What were you thinking! Do you think that your thoughts are the same as the thoughts of the Lord? Do you think that your ways are the same as the ways of the Lord? Do you think that the values, fears, and dreams of the Babylonian empire are the same as God's? Do you think that you can go on with your puppet routine and culture bound world view and satisfy the deepest longings of your soul? Do you think that you have no need of seeking the Lord?

Some six hundred years later, when Jesus was keeping an eye on current events, he took the opportunity to do some, What are you thinking!?

teaching about God with his followers. Along the way he questioned them about the meaning of two grim tragedies: the imperial troops senseless murder of a few peasants; a tower collapsing and killing 18 bystanders (Christian Century, p. 218). He began the inquiry with a rhetorical question that exposed an incorrect belief about God. What were you thinking!? God did not have a hand in killing those who died when psycho Herod carried out a massacre of worshipping Jews in Galilee. What were you thinking!? God did not cause that tower of Siloam to fall on people in Jerusalem.

“No, but . . .” said Jesus (vs. 5). No, but God did gift all creation and creatures with the free will to be all their Maker intended them to be . . . a blessing to the on-going creative cycle of life. God created storms to renew the face of the earth with water and wind. God gifted people with free will and the power to make just peace and to do good.

“No, but unless you repent, you will perish just as they did,” said Jesus (vs. 3). Right into their unrighteous thinking, Jesus issued the call to repentance. What are you thinking!? Do you think that you can do away with your fear of suffering and death by thinking that God targets and punishes the worst sinners among us? Do you think that you’ll escape something bad happening to you by blaming others? Do you think that there’s no hurry in asking what God thinks about the disasters? Do you think that there’s no hurry in returning to the ways of the Lord because it didn’t happen to you? I don’t think so! Wrong.

Lent is the time for self examination. Today, Isaiah and Jesus call us to examine our worldview and belief system because . . . My thoughts are not your thoughts, says the Lord. And my ways are not your ways declares the Lord (Is. 55:8). Specifically, they ask us to examine what we think about God and others when we fall victim to a higher power.

What were you thinking about God when the Haitian and Chilean earthquakes hit? And, what were you thinking about the victims?

What do you think about God in this event? *In the news recently, it was reported that compensation received by family members of those who*

died on 9/11 was based on the victim's earning potential. What this means is that a widow of a minimum-wage worker in a restaurant in the World Trade Center was told that her husband's life was worth less than that of the executive 100 floors above (UCC Daily Devotional, 3/1/10). And, what do you think about the minimum wage worker?

Lent is the time for confession and repentance of sin. Seek ye the Lord while God may be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the Lord that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon (Is. 55:6-7). Is there anything in your thinking that contributes to a "no hurry," complacent attitude about taking good care of yourself, others, and God's creation? (ex., God helps those who help themselves? God doesn't get involved in national politics. The restaurant worker should have found a higher paying job. It's the earthquake victims' fault--they should have built more structurally sound buildings). If so, repent of ungodly thoughts!

Why? Because Lent is the time for receiving the mercies of the Lord. . . . Listen carefully to me and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live (Is. 55:2b-3a). *I remember, wrote a young pastor, a trip to the hospital just a few years ago. I was there to visit a beautiful young man from Spring Lake, Michigan, whose life was being robbed one blood cell at a time by a viscous and unrelenting leukemia. Because he was so weakened, I knelt next to his bed to look at him eyeball to eyeball. I said quietly, "Hi, Tim." "Hi," he replied. After a long pause, Tim broke the silence by saying gently, "I have learned something." I said, "tell me what you have learned?" He said, very faintly, "I have learned that life isn't like a VCR." Perplexed, I said, "I don't get it. What do you mean?" He said, drawing his next breath in pain, "Life isn't like a VCR---you can't fast-forward the bad parts. "You know what else I learned?" he said. "No, I really don't. Please tell me" I replied. "I have learned," he whispered, "that Jesus Christ is in every frame, and right now it's just enough" (Perspective, May 1997, "God is in Every Frame").*