

Scripture

Ephesians 3:14-21

John 6:1-21

Closer Than You Think

My girls just spent a week at summer camp at my parents church and they came home singing a song I used to sing at camp. "My God is so Big, so strong and so mighty there's nothing my God cannot do" It is really cute to see little Malaya jumping in and singing songs that are getting deep within her and at the same time I wish I could have the same kind of faith my girls do.

In 1952 J.B. Philips wrote a book titled "Your God is Too small" In his book he argued "The trouble with many people today is that they have not found a God big enough for modern needs." If Philip were to write his book today it might need to be titled "Your God is Too Small and Too Distant." He might say: "The challenge for many people today is finding a God who is big enough to embrace the world and close enough to fill their inner emptiness." "Many of us do have a god who is too small. Without knowing it, we have substituted a puny and punitive god for the great and gracious God revealed in the history of Israel and in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The substitute god we've fashioned is limited, narrow, and tame--does nothing surprising or amazing--and is boxed-in by our preconceptions. This god is stingy with mercy and has only enough love for "our kind of people"--our nation or tribe or race or family or social class or denomination. This god of our own making is predictable, safe, and boring. Such a god is hardly worthy of praise, so we shore up worship with louder volume and shine it up with greater glitz. We allow less time for silence, because this passive god couldn't possibly have anything crucial or even interesting to say. We don't expect this diminutive deity to restore, redeem, or transform anyone or anything. Since the best we can hope for is sympathy and advice, preaching is about coping with the way things are, rather than about the in-breaking of an entirely new and saving order of things."¹

As I read today's scriptures and as I heard my children sing this week I pondered how do I get back to that kind of faith. It brought me back to one of my favourite meditations. I have shared it with you before but I thought it would be a good day to share it again. I did not make this video because I had some technical issues trying to make my own but the photos are beautiful. I personally often like to close my eyes and listen to the words.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GQejBUDjQsQ>

¹ Our Vast and Loving God The Rev. Dr. Guy Sayles, CBF First Baptist Church of Asheville, NC
Ephesians 3:14-21 9th Sunday of Pentecost - Year B July 29, 2012

If we believe in a far away God that doesn't engage the world there is no way the holy will come close enough to nourish and sustain us. A small and distant god leaves us feeling overwhelmed by change and threatened by emptiness. My adult life has been lived entirely in an era of massive transition and change. *Economic changes, Worldview changes, Technological changes swarm about us every day.*

"Some of the changes bewilder and frustrate us; others amaze and delight us. Whether we consider them "positive" or "negative," the shifts keep happening and the ground beneath our feet doesn't feel solid. All the while, we're also trying to cope with more immediate and personal changes: illness, family crises, challenges at work and school, the limitations imposed by aging, and inevitable transitions brought on by the simple passing of time. ...

The Rev. Dr. Guy Sayles wrote "Everyone is temporary. Everything is impermanent. Our vulnerability to change sometimes overwhelms us; and when it does, a small god can't help us. And a distant god can't do anything about the emptiness which threatens us. We all live through seasons which demand more than we can possibly deliver. Work grinds on, but our energy is long gone. Needs pile up, but we're at risk for caving-in. Opportunities multiply, but we're divided. The schedule is jammed full, and our hearts are alarmingly empty. *Loved ones die and bad things happen to good people.*

Maybe that's how things are for you now. You've spent your emotional accounts into near-bankruptcy; you're way over your limits; you've maxed-out your soul. Foreclosure on your identity has begun. You're at risk for losing who you most truly are.

Most days most of us just get out of bed, put on our uniforms of responsibility, our practiced façades of can-do optimism, our masks of habit, and our armor of protection, and do what we have to do. There's a kind of grace in our being able to do so; but I know from listening to people's hearts that there are a lot of people--more than you might imagine--who worry and wonder about how much longer they can cope with all the demands, respond to all the pressures, and meet all the expectations they feel bearing down on them.² That is when it is time to sabbath, its the season to remember the God who is bigger than we can ever ask or imagine, the one of miracles that we take for granted and cease to notice.

"Eventually, the emptiness threatens to consume us; it moves to take over everything else. When it does, a small and distant god can't help us. Thankfully, as Paul's prayer for the Ephesian Christians reminds us, we don't have a small and distant god. The real God, revealed to us in the history of Israel and in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, is magnificent, mysterious, and mighty. Paul prayed:

I pray that, according to the riches of God's glory, God may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through the Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

The real God is vast beyond our comprehending, beautiful beyond our appreciating, and wonderful beyond our imagining. God encompasses everything: past, present and future; near

² The Rev. Dr. Guy Sayles

and far; what we have discovered and what remains hidden. God is above and beyond, among and within, high and holy, close and compassionate.

God's great love leaves us breathless with astonishment. Paul prayed that we would know what he admitted was beyond knowing: the breadth and length and height and depth of love. It includes everyone and everything, radiates with a redeeming grace which envelops all our shame and guilt, and shines with a dazzling glory which fills every shadowy corner of our hearts and of the universe with hope.

Thankfully, this prayer isn't a list of assignments for us to carry out or expectations to meet or demands to shoulder. The God who has been made known and real to us in Jesus isn't standing over us with a clipboard and a checklist. There is nothing in this prayer that hints at a self-help project or a self-improvement regimen.

The prayer simply and compellingly invites us to realize how much God loves us--to experience God's surrounding, encompassing, and holding us with love. And it promises us that God will fill us when we are empty, make us strong when we are weak, and keep us rooted and grounded when everything is changing.

I invite you to experience this prayer for yourself. Ask God to thrill you again with a sense of wonder and majesty, to fill you with God's own life, and to show you all you can comprehend about the wide embrace of divine love. Receive God's strength, so that you may live faithfully and joyfully in these challenging times of change. Open yourself to God's fullness, so that the once-empty places in you may overflow with abundance and glory. We have a vast, loving, and powerful God who is "at work within us" and "is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine. To that God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever."

Let us pray: Vast and loving God, give us minds filled with thoughts of your bright glory, hearts overflowing with the joy of your love, and wills strengthened by your tender power, so that we may live in the world with confidence and compassion; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.³

³ http://day1.org/3945-our_vast_and_loving_god