

Supported and Sustained

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 40: 21-31

My newsletter column this month features a list of ten things I love about Hillcrest. Like a heart-shaped box of Stover's chocolates, getting started was easy but stopping was another thing!

Growing up, I would have said the same thing about the church I belonged to. I loved that church for a hundred different reasons. In fact, I could never figure out why everyone in town wasn't part of our community of faith, we had so much going for us. We knew God to be gracious, not wrathful, far more interested in fostering justice than in judging us. Our Jesus wanted us to follow, not just admire him—and we did, in many marvelous ways. We were inclusive before people even used that word. We knew that bringing our brains to church wasn't just good but necessary, and that having questions and doubts wasn't evidence of weak faith, but was part of how faith became stronger.

That's the love part of the relationship I had with the church that formed me.

But like so many love stories, the object of my affection wasn't perfect. What troubled me, what regularly grieved me, what even led me away from the church for a time was this: to borrow from Isaiah today, we had not heard, we did not know, we did not understand.

In a very particular way, I mean. We had not heard, known, or understood that the God of all time, space, and creation was really, truly among us, prepared to have us rely on Him and grow strong through Him.

To put it in theological terms: our God was mostly transcendent and only a little bit immanent. Our God was wonderfully infinite but not particularly intimate. When we came together, I mean.

No one in that beautiful church of mine would have argued against Isaiah's claims of God's supreme greatness and power. The vast sweep of the Sierra Nevada mountain range just to the east and the awesome wonder of nearby Yosemite National Park kept this reality before us all the time. We might never have regarded ourselves as grasshoppers, as Isaiah does, but we knew that God was God and that we were not.

But what my much-loved congregation didn't know, in a practical sense, was how to rely on God's strength, how to open ourselves to God's understanding, how to wait upon the Lord rather than charge ahead, enormously well-meaning but very much human-powered.

Excellent self-starters and experienced boot-strappers that we were, successful professionals and talented community members that we were, committed and determined congregants that we all were, we moved forward fueled largely by our own energies, schedules, and ideas.

Presbyterian pastor and author Graham Standish calls this "rational functionalism." It's when we do for God but not with God.

That there was vitality, vision, and strength that God was just aching to share with us was a concept, but not something we knew how to tap into in any real way. That God was continually standing at the ready and would have delighted in being called upon to inspire, propel, and sustain our faithful efforts was something that did not come up in council meetings or whole-group conversation.

We were as earnest in our faith as the day is long. And we were rational functionalists. We believed God had given us brains for a reason and we put them to exceedingly excellent use.

In hindsight, I suspect that what held us back, what kept us relying more on ourselves and less on God, was that we simply could not imagine how God could do all the things Isaiah says God wants to do—give us power, strength, vision, and a sense of right timing—without also micromanaging us, leaving us feeling diminished, even discounted, in important ways. This mind-set is especially common among Christians who have been blessed with intelligence and success.

Years ago, I celebrated New Year's Eve with a dear, dear friend at a nightclub where a mutual friend was playing in the band. At one point in the evening, my friend took my hand, pulled me out onto the dance floor, and drew me close for a slow dance. I hadn't danced like that in a long time and I was, I'll admit, rather uncomfortable. And it showed.

"Karen," my friend said finally, leaning in and whispering in my ear, "the way this works is that you let me lead." Doing that took everything I had. But you know what? He was right. It did work that way and that way was wonderful.

God has been leaning in and whispering this same thing to mainline churches for a while now. Churches like the one I grew up in, churches like the ones I worshiped with in seminary, churches like the ones I have served, churches like the one I am privileged to pastor today.

God is asking churches like ours to dance. God is inviting us to draw close and relax into the warm strength of God's loving arms. God's Spirit is calling us into a new kind of partnership, where we learn together how to consciously and consistently let God take the lead.

God is longing for a new kind of partnership, one where we discover how much less of our own precious strength it takes to be the church together and how much more life energy and satisfaction comes when we rely on God to do what God does so well: be God!

Something happened here last month that was most remarkable. Two Sundays before our congregational meeting, some of us gathered here in the sanctuary to consider our budget options. Sitting in the pews, talking amongst ourselves, something swept over us and we had a "more than" kind of experience. God was with us in a quiet but profound way, nudging us toward new possibilities and fresh vitality.

Never in all my years in the church have I heard a Moderator say what Pat Riddell said at the end of that congregational gathering: that she'd felt God's Spirit moving among us and that this was truly an answer to her prayers.

And answer to prayer because a Source beyond ourselves was helping us say and consider what we might not have said or considered on our own. We were strengthened that morning; we were lifted up as on eagles' wings. We were given something we did not generate. Or could have predicted.

The God Isaiah proclaims this morning, the one who supports and strengthens and sustains, this God was on the move that morning. And this past week, too, and in powerful ways.

From out of nowhere, people were calling me and reaching out to Cindy LaJoy with ideas and offers and new ways of coming at the challenges that lie ahead. Ideas and offers and fresh perspective came out of nowhere and which were, get this, exactly the kinds of things Cindy and I had talked about trying to get going here all the way back in December. Ideas and offers and perspective that, truth be told, I predicted would require a lot of effort on our part to get moving. And by a lot of effort, I mean monumental, rocket-off-the-launchpad effort.

All this is, I believe, just the beginning. Just the beginning of a journey with God into a new year and beyond, where together we learn to consciously and consistently trust God's presence and power as we follow God's lead. Where we learn to live with God, not just for God.

“Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. [Our God] does not faint or grow weary; [God's] understanding is unsearchable. [God] gives power to the faint, and strength to the powerless.”

Isaiah is speaking to each of us, of course. But he's also speaking to all of us. To this body, this congregation, we who have so much to offer this community and world. God is, I believe with all my heart, calling this congregation to live as Jesus did: actively reliant upon God.

In my years away from the church, one question haunted me: How did Jesus do what he did? How did he do it?

He did what he did because he held fast to his convictions, of course. He did what he did because he held tightly to his sense of call. Jesus did what he did because he held fast to sacred scripture and the certainty that God's vision for God's people could be realized here on earth.

Jesus held on to many things, I am sure. But this is not how he did what he did. He did what he did because he let himself be held. He did what he did because he let himself be held. Held by a God who shared in Jesus' delights and who supported and sustained him at every turn and in every moment as Jesus carried out his earthly ministry.

Jesus, the one we follow, was a follower, too. Throughout his life, he followed God's lead. That's the secret that made him so strong. And it's what will make us strong, too. Not for our own sake, of course, but for the sake of the world God is inviting us to serve.

Amen.

Author's Note: I am grateful to Graham Standish for his book, “Becoming a Blessed Church.” It gave me a name--rational functionalism--for what I've long observed and struggled with. The book also gave me a way to think about what a Spirit-filled progressive church might look and feel like.

The wonderful 20th century German theologian, Dorothee Soelle, gets the credit for the line that Jesus had a secret that made him strong. I forget which book of her includes it but it has stayed with me ever since I read it!