

Ephesians 1:1-3

A while back, the Westminster/John Knox Press initiated a series of books under the theme, “*For Today.*” Columbia Theological Seminary professor Shirley Guthrie was asked to write the volume, “*The Apostles’ Creed for Today.*” In the preface, he wrote “*Sunday after Sunday the minister... says, ‘Let us stand and say what we believe, using the words of the Apostles’ Creed.’ Some members of the congregation find it very meaningful to recite these old familiar words, remembering that Christians of many church traditions have been confessing them for almost two thousand years, and knowing that this very day all over the world, in all languages of the world, fellow Christians will say the Creed as they gather for worship. Others will recite the Creed mechanically, without giving much thought to the content and meaning of what they are saying.*”

Then there are some newer and also older Christians and church members who are not sure that they can honestly affirm what the Creed says. They either repeat the words with a guilty conscience, simply stand there silent, or perhaps edit the Creed [in their minds] to recite some statements and delete others. They have questions and reservations: Should I say these words when I do not understand what they mean or why they are important, and when I am pretty sure I do not agree with some of them. Why do we need this or any other creed anyway? Shouldn’t we look to God’s Word in the Bible rather than to some ancient or modern human words from the church to find out what we are to believe and do? This ancient creed may have made sense and been helpful a long time ago, but it is pretty irrelevant for people in the modern world...

Then Guthrie comments: “Christians struggle with questions like these. Not

because they are doubters or heretics who need to be converted to the traditional faith of the church expressed in the Apostles' Creed. [And] the church needs them. It needs their disturbing questions that invite all of us to take seriously as they the decision we are called to make when we stand to say, 'I believe...'” (in Justo Gonzalez, *“The Apostles' Creed for Today,”* 2007, p. xi-xii.).

I read all that because while opening affirmation of the Creed, *“I believe in God the Father Almighty...”* is a declaration of belief, it is also--if taken seriously--not always an easy statement to make. Will Willimon, former chaplain of the Duke University Chapel, began his ministry in North Myrtle Beach, SC. He reflected once on looking out his window this time of year, in the dead of summer when along with everything else, church life seemed to stand still. Around the corner from his church, the sign at another church declared, *“God hasn't taken a vacation!”* obviously scolding all of their members who had. Willimon says, as he considered the quiet summer, *“I'm not all that sure about God, either...God may have thrown in the towel along with everybody else and moved to cooler climates, too,”* (Will Willimon, *A Wild and Windy Mountain,* 1984).

If we are honest, there are those times and places in our lives when we may well wonder if God is “on vacation,” when God is “away.” It's not just that we do not hear God *“in the earthquake, the wind, or the fire.”* We don't hear God in the still, small voice either. God seems absent. We wonder, as did the psalmist in the mocking words of his enemies, *“Where are you, O God?”* And sometimes, it's not just the voices of others we hear, it's the voices within--within ourselves-- whether in time of sadness and loss, or just when we want so desperately to have a word about what to do next, or maybe--like Willimon--when we're just watching the long days of summer. Even

now, we may have our own reasons for the voice rising up in us “*where are you, O God?*” Certainly, the people in many places--both in this our world and in our own country--may be asking.

Further, the prayer requests in our own bulletin week after week may at a level be asking, “*Where are you, O God?*” When we hear the words of the psalmist, we see that it is clearly not for lack of seeking that he wonders where God is. He says: “*My soul thirsts for God, the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?*” We can identify with him. This is not some unbeliever or casual believer. For the psalmist, God is not an option for life. God is a necessity. The psalmist thirsts for God, he desires God.

Yet, he hears with some real reason, “*Where are you, O God?*”

This word “desire” is a strong word. It is stronger than want, or need. To say so someone, “*You are my heart’s desire*” is quite different from saying, “*It’s nice to see you.*” Yet desire, if we are to live, if we to live deeply for sure, is an essential dimension to our lives. Without desire, no serious athlete--at the Olympics or in other serious con-test--would ever get better. A good question to ask yourself, even today: “*Do I desire God as much as the Olympians desire the gold metal? Do I consider, do I work at, do I desire God as much as they desire their dream of winning?*” Without desire, no relation-ship grows--with God or anyone. Indeed, it is desire that motivates, that energizes, and that produces. It’s not what we have so much that defines us, not what we possess. But it is what we seek. That really is the question of our lives anytime.

We all have different kinds of desires, desires at different levels of our lives, some more important than others, some more immediate than others. It is the psalmist

and the Christian conviction that the most important desire we can have is the desire for God. That's why the great 5th century theologian Augustine penned, "*O Lord, Thou has made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless 'til they find their rest in Thee.*"

But saying that, Augustine also understood that we will never completely have what we desire in this life. Desire is never completely satisfied this life. Augustine understood that, as another psalm says, "*we seek God's face always.*"--God's face here meaning God's presence and blessing, and it is ongoing. Not in this life--nor even the next--do we ever completely possess God. Here in this life--yes the Christian life--we never reach the end of this seeking God in our lives. We don't have complete fulfillment of life. It's just not that way. As preacher Peter Gomes has written, "*The essence of the relationship with God is not having God, but in seeking God.*"

And it's not just the psalmist and Augustine who understand this. When Paul writes those opening words of Ephesians--"*Grace to you and peace from God our Father....Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ...*" (Eph 1:2-3)--well, he is writing those words--making that declaration about God--from prison in Rome. He is under house arrest, waiting trial, with the very real possibility of the sword coming down on his neck. It finally did, in fact. To say, "*I believe in God the Father Almighty,*" is no easy thing, sometimes.

That may help us a little when we hear some Christians speak as they seem so sure of God's intervening action in their lives, so sure of God's blessing their endeavors, so sure of God's guidance as to what they should do, so sure that God has answered their prayers just as they prayed. I am not saying that those things don't ever happen. But I

am saying, as I read the psalms, Paul, and other thoughtful Christians, God seems not always so easily found or discerned. Maybe God desires to be hidden from us, more often than not. Perhaps God wants us to realize the desire for God is in some ways now more important than the finding, at least in finding God to do just what we want or hope. At least, it appears that way to the psalmist and to the apostle Paul.

The psalmist continues: *“My soul is cast down within me, therefore I remember you.”* If desire is important to the psalmist, so is memory. Not to have the pleasure of remembering is something that robs us of the joys of being human. Memory is a vital aspect of WHO WE ARE. As memory goes, so do we. Writer Thomas Merton said, *“God gave us memory, so that we might have roses in December.”* In dark times, often it is memory that helps us, sustains us, can even cause to laugh, as well as to weep.

So, the psalmist remembers, and calls on us to remember, too. To remember God. The presence of God--at least the overt presence of God--is not something always obvious. God may have caused the earthquake that let Paul out of prison in Philippi (Acts 16:16ff.). But no such earthquake came and let Paul out of prison in Rome. *“When my soul is cast down within me, I remember,”* says the psalmist, though. And Paul remembered in prison and under threat of death, and could still say, *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”* Memory is God’s gift by which we look to the past and find strength in the present. We can remember even if we can’t feel God’s presence. Yes, memory is essential to living as is desire.

And then, there is hope. The psalmist does not stop with desire and memory. *“Hope in God,”* the psalmist states so simply. Some years ago there was that Bill Murray movie, “Groundhog Day.” Remember?? What if life were like that movie,

where you woke up to the same things, and nothing more every day? Day after day? What if there were no new possibilities of anything new? No hope of new beginnings? No new loves? No new people entering into our lives? No hope of anything getting better? NO hope of reconciliation and healing, of moving past old wounds, old hatreds, old habits?

Over the doorway of Hell in Dante's "*Inferno*," there were the words, "*Abandon Hope All Ye Who Enter Here.*" Such words were painted graphically over many an altar in medieval churches reminding sinners of the need to repent. But as one writer put it, "*To deprive a person of hope--that is, to deprive someone of even the possibility of the future or to consign someone in the present only, always to bear the burden of the past--is the ultimate punishment.*" Part of the gospel of our Lord is we should hope. God would not have us ever stop hoping, whether we are at the beginning of life's journey, or in the middle somewhere--no matter what we are going through--or anticipating its conclusion. The psalmist had hope. Paul had hope. We are meant to have--hope, too.

Desire, memory, hope. These are all essential if we work our way through life hoping to experience the presence and blessing of God. But there's one more essential according to the psalmist, beyond these three, and that is praise. "*Hope in God. For I shall again praise him, my help and my God,*" is the repeated refrain. We must have something that draws us beyond the pursuits of this life--as good as they may be. We must have something that draws us out, that points us to something greater than our-selves. That something is the ability to offer "praise" to the God who made us, in whom we live, who loves us more than we know, who "*keeps us in the everlasting*

arms.”

If we really contemplate our God in this manner, it is no small thing to say, “*I believe in God the Father Almighty.*” It is heartfelt confession, it is strong conviction, it is the most profound thing anyone can say really.

“*Where are you, O God?*” is not a bad question. Sometimes, we need to reflect upon our faith, and ask it. “*Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?*” asks the psalmist. Answer: “*Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.*” No, it is no small thing to stand and say--really say-- “*I believe in God...*” And when we do--and so live--we may be surprised to find God, sooner or later, in those seemingly God-forsaken places of our very own lives, such as they are, and hear God’s voice resonate within, “*Yes, I am with you, even now, even here.*” Amen.