

August 22, 2010
Isaiah 58:9b-14
Jeremiah 1:1-10

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Shrinking God

Sometime in the late 1960s there was a newspaper strike in New York City that went on for weeks. James Reston, then a columnist and editor for the *New York Times*, was interviewed around day 10 and asked what he thought of a particular current event. Somewhat exasperated he replied, “How would I know? I haven’t written about it.”

I share the same failing; I need to write about something before I can really understand it. Which is a way of excusing what I have done this week and begging your indulgence this morning as you listen to my ruminations.

In January when I met with the deacons to discuss the specifics of my time with you this summer, I told them straight off that Charlie and I had been invited to a wedding out of state on August 14 and I would not, therefore, be available to lead worship on August 15. As we had agreed that I would get two Sundays off during the course of the summer, all seemed fine. But the bride and groom, in what might be considered infinite wisdom, decided to scratch their big, expensive wedding and elope. Which put us home in Vermont last weekend and left me free to do something I’ve wanted to do for some time.

On Sunday morning I went to the Essex Alliance Church. I had heard a little about it, read in the paper that they are going to build a new facility that will seat 1,200 worshippers and I have run into people who go there and are thrilled with it. Will and I actually talked about this before he left, both of us expressing curiosity about this church where between two and three thousand people worship each Sunday. Curiosity and a little trepidation.

What, I wondered, is so appealing about this church? Why are more and more people joining? Even the Charlotte Congregational Church has lost some members to the Essex allure.

So I set out on Sunday, cautioning myself against judgment, encouraging myself to be open to the experience and most of all to God. After I had been directed to a parking place by the traffic cop—yes, there are so many cars coming and going that they employ a policeman from 7:00 a.m. until 12:30 p.m. to guide the vehicles—after I parked I tried to figure out which door I should go in. Inadvertently, I didn't choose the sanctuary entrance but found myself instead in a café where people were having breakfast and drinking coffee.

There are three worship times at the Essex Alliance Church on Old Stage Road: 8:00 a.m., 9:45 and 11:15. This is not to be confused with the two worship services that take place each Sunday at the Essex Cinema. At each service time at Old Stage, there are three worship venues: the sanctuary, the café where the service is projected on a large screen and the family room where, if your kids are squirmy, you too can watch the service on a big screen while your children play with toys on the floor. So at Old Stage each Sunday there are effectively 9 services. At the Essex Cinema there are 2, for a total of 11 services each Sunday morning.

The sanctuary was an amphitheatre around the stage where the band was situated. Above them hung the large screen on which the service was projected and the words to the songs were streamed. Although I'm bad at guessing numbers, I would estimate that the sanctuary held around 400 people and every seat was filled, with the ushers asking folks to squeeze in a little here and there while putting extra chairs in the aisles. The service started with the piano player, seated on his bench, going over announcements and welcoming everyone. Then we went into the music, four long songs in a row. They were what are called praise songs, having repetitions of phrases, just as we do with some of our chants. Everyone stood for the songs, which must have gone on for almost 15 or 20 minutes. Then the lead pastor, Scott Solcum, came on stage. He was dressed in jeans, casual shoes, and an untucked button-down shirt that seemed large even for his substantial frame. Accessible, friendly and relaxed was the message that he projected. He went immediately into his theme; no scripture was read independently from his sermon, though short quotes were used to support his point. The gist of his sermon was that

though everything in the world and our lives is changing, God never changes. God is immutable. And by extension, God's word, the Holy Scriptures, never change either. As people we are weak and prone to sin, but God will forgive you. There is nothing you can do that is beyond God's power to right.

Aside from what was actually happening, I want to convey what was going on in my mind and heart. At this point, intellectually, I was able to say, "Yes, I agree with that. Some of that. That's good." But then he went on to say that we spend too much time reading the works of man, watching TV, and not enough time reading God's book, which was not written by men but by God himself.

"Whoa," I thought, "lost me there." On several points. I should say that one of the most difficult aspects of the whole experience for me was the repetitive portrayal of God as "He." You may have noticed that I don't use pronouns in reference to God because doing so limits God for me. But I don't think I fully recognized how theologically hampering it is for me to hear God constantly referred to as male. "The only person who does not change," Scott exhorted, "Is God."

And in my mind, "Wait, wait, God isn't a person."

In the beginning of the sermon Scott was very energetic; he spoke quickly, cracked jokes, had great timing, told funny stories about his family and you felt drawn in and comfortable, if a bit agitated by his high-energy delivery. By the end of the sermon, when he had us thinking about the worst sins we had ever committed and how God could set them right IF we followed His purpose, I felt a little on edge. As he told us repeatedly to follow God's rule, he gave an example: "When He says no sex before marriage, it's not open to interpretation; it means no sex before marriage. Period." Follow His purpose and you will be ready for the end time that, incidentally, may come at any time. But as Scott ended the sermon, his delivery was slow, quiet and reassuring as he talked about God's love and forgiveness. It was gentle and in some way, though I felt relieved and even "saved," I also felt just a smidgen manipulated, having been revved up and made to acknowledge my own failings and then welcomed into the everlasting arms. Of Scott, it seemed, not God.

The service went on for about an hour and a quarter and when we were dismissed, I darted for the door, my head reeling. I should mention that one of the challenging things for me, and I hate even admitting this, was that the man who was sitting next to me had on the absolute worst perfume—nauseating—especially since I think he was so liberally scented to cover other more familiar and unappealing scents. I tried not breathing, but that didn't work. And I felt petty and small for cringing away from him and leaning out into the aisle and I kept saying to God, "What's this supposed to mean? Am I to see Christ in this man?"

Ever since Sunday I have been trying—have you noticed?—to put words to what I felt about the experience.

But first I want to go back to the passages we heard this morning from Isaiah and from Psalm 71 that talked about God's constancy, love and generosity, God's nurturing spirit and gentle heart. "The Lord will guide you continually, and satisfy your need in parched places, make your bones strong, and you will be like a watered garden," Isaiah says. It all sound so reassuring and relieving. But it starts out with a caveat: "If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted," then all the wonderful things will happen.

I hear these words as I seek to explain, reflect and not be critical about my experience last Sunday. My finger of accusation curls back into my palm; the shame I felt at my reaction to the man beside me remains, however, present. It would be easy for me to simply say that that particular form of worship is not for me and be finished, but it behooves us all as Christians to wonder why this particular wing of Christianity is experiencing such enormous growth around the world.

The major feeling I had upon leaving Essex was one of sadness. I wasn't sad because we here in Charlotte have no need of a traffic cop to direct our swelling numbers, or because I felt that somehow people were expected in Essex to leave their brains at the door along with their doubts and questions. No, I was sad because in that hour and fifteen minutes I felt God shrink. In part this was because God was portrayed as an old wise man

but also because in so doing I felt God retreat from all the places I find God: from the earth and nature and animals and music and love and grace and peace and tears and sorrow and joy and trial and starry nights. God became clearly the boss man with a purpose and the great mystery of God and Christ wafted off into the sky. The traditional hierarchical structure of God above and us below was clearly delineated. What was present, however, was an emphasis on God's working in people's lives, God's constant presence, but it didn't always seem a reassuring presence. We have some relatives who are of an evangelical bent and above their telephone is a little sign that says, "God is the third person on this call. God is listening." It has, over the years, made me want to yank the phone from the wall or at the least never use that line.

Isaiah's prophecy of what pleases God is very clear: feed the hungry, be less judgmental, keep the Sabbath holy, or as he said in a wonderful turn of phrase, "Refrain from trampling the Sabbath!" We do this by pursuing our own interests or our own affairs. The catch is not that if we keep the Sabbath Holy God will love and provide for us; what Isaiah says is that if we honor the Sabbath and focus only on God, we will take delight in God. It's not that if we are good God will find delight in us, but *we* will love God more deeply. And when that happens God says, "I will make you ride upon the heights of the earth."

God needs love. Imagine that. A lot of the time I think we go around searching for and sometimes feeling God's love; we are the loved, the recipients, or we hope to be. But here Isaiah says so clearly that God wants our love back and he tells us exactly how to express it: care for creation with grace and spend time with God. One day a week, just one day when we make God the primary focus of our attention. Observing the Sabbath used to be a little fuzzy for me; what did it really mean to stop work if you were, as I was for a stretch in my life, a stay-at-home mom with five kids? Not work? They'd starve and run into the road, drown in the bathtub, set the house on fire or draw with markers all over the furniture thereby, incidentally, making more work for me. Observing the Sabbath became challenging in a different way when I went into ministry because Sunday looked a whole lot like a workday.

In our highly technological age, I have found a very easy way to observe the Sabbath—whatever day you choose. Well, it's not easy at all, but it's clear: unplug. No emails, no computer, no phone, no computers masquerading as phones. Like the observant Jews who first fashioned the Sabbath and refrained from using fire, the charge is not to use these core things that connect us to the world and inevitably make more work and distract us from God. I must admit that I don't do this one day every week, though I think about doing it. On the days that I succeed, however, God and I have a nice time.

Listening to Isaiah I get a much rounder vision of God than I did last Sunday. But also, I'd have to admit, a less clear, delineated vision as well. Maybe it's easier for some people to worship a clearly defined image than it is to approach the great mystery of God. But if we follow the example of the psalmist and Isaiah, we see that how we envision God is an exercise in seeing and semantics. First we have to be open to seeing God and then, if we are inclined, to expressing what we have experienced; it's an exercise in similes and metaphors at best as we use the language of words and the yearning of our souls. The key is to being open. I think that Scott Slocum would say that we need to be aware of God's purpose for us. I bridle here, because I'm not sure God has a set purpose for me that it is already ordained. That makes me feel that if I can't discern that purpose, I'm failing and lost.

What I do know is that sometimes I have what I like to call God moments, when the fabric of the dimensions of our world separates a bit and God slips a calling card through. I'm sure you've had them too, those times that for just a moment take your breath away.

I'd like to share one these times with you that happened a little over a month ago. As you may know, Charlie's mother, Marjorie, died early this summer. Her memorial service was at the Corcoran Chapel at Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts. She had quite a following for having pioneered the idea of using horses as therapeutic tools to help physically and mentally challenged people. She basically applied her work with Outward Bound to teaching disabled people that they can do more than they think they

can, even astride a 1,500-pound horse. So the chapel that holds 1,200 was pretty full. I led the service, Jane played the violin with her accompanist who had come up from New York City, family and friends were assembled from far and wide as happens with memorial services.

When I was writing the eulogy, the image of Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz came to me. Marj had had a tornado of sorts in her life—her husband left her with three small children and she found herself alone on a farm with horses.

On her new way down the yellow brick road toward her tomorrows, she collected people along the way, some who sought courage like the cowardly lion, others who were looking for intelligence and knowledge like the scarecrow and some who most of all needed some understanding and softened hearts. Like Dorothy, she accompanied them and us on a path to discovery.

And when we arrived at the Wizard's magical chamber, many of us discovered that what we had been searching for so long was ours already; that we had within us the heart, courage and capability to do more than we had ever dreamed. This was something she knew, she believed, in an almost fairy tale way.

I had not shared this eulogy with anyone before the service. As we were driving down to Massachusetts the morning of the memorial, Jane was in the back seat making lists on a scrap piece of paper, of the songs she would play for the postlude when everyone was leaving. Looking up she asked me if I thought she could play a particular fiddle tune.

“No,” I replied, “She wasn't a fiddle tune person.” But suddenly I had an idea, “Could you possibly play ‘Somewhere Over the Rainbow?’”

Jane said nothing. She just looked intently at me and lifted up the piece of paper she had grabbed from her recycling pile as she left home. It was the sheet music to “Somewhere Over the Rainbow.” Not, incidentally, the usual music for a classical violinist, but months before a bride had requested it for her wedding and of all the pieces of paper in the recycling pile, that was the one she grabbed as we headed out the door.

Okay, I thought, we're on the right path, thank you God. And when that song filled the chapel as people walked out into the hot July sun, I felt that the dreams we dream about God really can come true.

Dear God, we love you.

Amen.