

When God stands accused

Isaiah 43:1-13

October 8, 2006

(placing an old teddy bear on the communion table)

When I was a child, my speech, feelings, and thinking were all those of a child. Now that I am an adult, I have no more use for childish ways.

I have grown up. I used to believe in God. I used to believe in Santa Claus. I used to believe that the world is a place where good things happen to good people. But I have grown up. I understand the world doesn't work that way. There is no Somebody, no God, out there looking out for me, protecting me, making sure good things happen for me.

I am an adult. I have left behind my childish ideas and beliefs. I see the world as it really is. I know I have to take responsibility for my own happiness or lack of it. I know I have to take responsibility for my own good ... or bad ... fortune.

(placing a photograph of my deceased father on the communion table)

It's not fair! Sure we can say it was good for him to die so suddenly -- without pain, without suffering, still healthy and active up to his last breath. But what about us? Is it fair to us? We still need him. We still want him. There is still so much to talk about, so much to show him, so much to share with him, so much he is missing!

So why did God let him die? Why did God take him from us? Doesn't God care about how we feel? Or maybe God can't do anything about it anyway. Maybe people just die when they die and God is powerless to change it.

(placing a globe on the communion table)

They say that looking at the wonders of the universe will make a believer out of you, but that has not been my experience. I remember looking out the window of an airplane as we rose higher and higher, and the people and cars and houses and fields dotting the surface of the earth grew smaller and smaller, stretching to the horizon in every direction. I tried to imagine a "God" watching out for all of this, in touch with all of this, "caring" about all these creatures crawling around on the earth's crust like ants, but I couldn't. Seeing that big picture, it all seemed so impersonal, so haphazard, so random.

When I think about the extraordinary size and complexity and diversity of the universe and all that fills it, I don't see evidence of intelligent design. I see a wild and wonderful chaos -- unrestrained, uncontrolled, unending chaos!

(placing a newspaper on the communion table)

You hear the same news I do. You read the same stories, if you have the stomach for it: little girls shot in Pennsylvania, dozens killed daily in Iraq, trusted officials abusing children. What is this world coming to? What are we -- the human race -- coming to? How will it all come out?

Global warming, a finite and shrinking supply of oil, a finite and shrinking and increasingly polluted water supply, overpopulation, terrorism, war, weapons of mass destruction. We will kill ourselves off one way or another. Human beings are themselves a weapon of mass destruction!

Peace and lasting prosperity are pipe dreams. The future is uncertain. No, the future is quite certain. This will all come to an end with a bang or a whimper, but it will end, sooner or later. There is nothing I can do about it. There is nothing you can do about it. There is nothing any God -- if there is a God -- can do about it.

You have heard some of God's accusers, some of those accusing God every day of neglect, abandonment, indifference, impotence, irrelevance, some of those accusing God of being no God at all. Who will speak when God stands accused? God says: *You are my witnesses!*

*Summon my people to court.
They have eyes, but they are blind;
they have ears, but they are deaf!
Summon the nations to come to the trial.
Which of their gods can predict the future?
Which of them foretold what is happening now?
Let these gods bring in their witnesses
to prove that they are right,
to testify to the truth of their words.
People of Israel, you are my witnesses;
I chose you to be my servant,
so that you would know me and believe in me
and understand that I am the only God.
Besides me there is no other god;
there never was and never will be.
I alone am the Lord,
the only one who can save you.
I predicted what would happen
and then I came to your aid.
No foreign god has ever done this;
you are my witnesses.
I am God and always will be ...*

Did you hear it? I missed it the first few times I read this passage. When God summons the people to court, who is being tried? Who is on trial?

God is! The God of Israel stands accused by his own people of abandonment and neglect and indifference and they are turning to other gods, to the gods of other nations, for help and for comfort. So God summons them all to court!-- his own people and any who might testify on behalf of these other gods. Let's try the case! And God's people? What is their role in the trial? *You are my witnesses!*

This is the role of God's people, their task, their calling -- to be witnesses; to witness to what God has done, to witness to who God is, even in the midst of the darkest times and the most difficult circumstances; to know God, to enjoy God, to believe God, to love God, and to tell and show the rest of the world that this God is for real! *There is no other god; there never was and never will be!*

This is the role of God's people, our task, our calling -- to witness to what God has done, to witness to who God is. So tell me -- tell the world! -- what has God done?

God did not prevent the death of those five little girls in Pennsylvania, if you can use that language, because it was a very sick man who did it, who made that choice. But what did God do there? Did you see what God did there? Death and horror and cruelty didn't win! Why? Because the faith of those people is real! In the midst of the greatest horror, they prayed for forgiveness for the killer's family. They asked to meet with his wife: *We need to meet with her, to encourage her, to help her.* Why? *Because our God is real ... We know where our children are. We know they are okay. We know we will go soon to join them. It's okay.*

Did you see what the children themselves did -- because their faith was real? The eldest child who was killed said, *Shoot me first*, trying to buy time for the other children. Why did she say that? Because her faith was real.

What has God done?

God didn't stop the death of my father-in-law, but in the midst of our grieving, we had a wonderful celebration of his life. We saw how much God had done through his life. In the memorial service, we saw all the people who were touched by him. We celebrated a good life, and we celebrated the God who keeps us still.

In the midst of the worst of circumstances and the darkest times, God's people witness to who God is.

God has taken care of my son. My oldest son has gone through some hard times, some dark shadows, some deep valleys. But now he is married and has a beautiful son and is wanting to love God all the more. Together they are seeking to put God at the center of their lives.

This is what God has done in difficult circumstances. We see it and we testify to it.

So tell me -- and tell the world! -- who is God? What is God like? Not what you have heard God is like, but what have you experienced for yourself?

I have experienced a God who is patient and persistent, who keeps coming back, keeps calling me back from the places to which I have strayed.

I have experienced a God who is generous, who has given me well more than I could have ever expected or probably deserve.

The Lord says: *You are my witnesses.* This is our task, our calling, to testify to what we have seen, to what we have heard, to what we believe, to what we know. What do you have to say? When you are called as a witness, what will you have to say?