

“Between a Rock and a Hard Place”

The Sovereignty of God

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Job 38: 1, 4 – 7

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I am excited about the fall season and the new church year, because I plan to preach on what we believe — some of the main doctrines of the church. I know doctrine isn't the hottest topic or very exciting sounding, but it really is the foundation of who we are. More and more I'm getting asked 'What do we believe about...?'. I think in the past knowing core Christian beliefs was taken for granted, but increasingly people don't really know what we believe.

Some churches are very doctrinal. They lay out in black and white what they believe, and those who are members are supposed to adhere to that 'correct belief'. I remember when we had Ruth Graham (Billy Graham's daughter) here to speak, she asked me, "But how do you ensure correct doctrine from your congregation members?" I remember being a little confused by her question, and I simply said: "We don't".

We don't tell people that you must believe in order to belong. The United Church of Canada is not a doctrinal church. We don't lay out 'correct doctrine'. That's not to say the UCC does not have doctrine. What we believe is laid out in the 20 Articles of Doctrine written at the time of Union in 1925; the 1940's A Statement of Faith; A New Creed written in 1968; and A Song of Faith written in 2006.

Each of these was written in very different times and contexts and you see a real evolution in them. So if you're looking for black and white answers you won't really get them in those statements that you find in at the beginning in the Doctrine section of the Manual or by googling United Church of Canada Statements of Faith.

<http://www.united-church.ca/community-faith/welcome-united-church-canada/faith-statements>.

The United Church statements of belief are all seen as subordinate to the primacy of scripture in the doctrine section of the Basis of Union.

The phrase "Faith seeking understanding" sums up somewhat how we believe. Saying "I believe" has a solid-not-moving sound to it. **More than "believers" of Jesus we are called to be "followers" of Jesus.** When you follow someone, you know that you are on the move and that the

view is going to change. Our exact beliefs change over time. God does not change, but our understanding of who God is does change.

You know that expression that it's important to "walk the talk"? We are very good at that in the United Church. We lean towards action and social justice rather than study and contemplation. **But it's also important for us be able to "talk the walk"**. We're pretty good at walking, but what is the ground we are walking on? Why do we do the things that we do?

So for a lot of the fall and into the winter, I'm going to dig into some basic Christian beliefs and what they mean for us in the modern age. Today I'm going to talk about the doctrine of the *Sovereignty of God*. This is the belief that God is sovereign—that God is Lord over and above all. Recognizing God's sovereignty is recognizing God's holiness.

When Moses stumbles upon the burning bush and encounters God, Moses is told "*Take off your shoes, for you are standing on holy ground*". Moses asks God "*Who are you, what is your name?*" God answers "*I am who I am*". This is a tough one to translate from the Hebrew. But God answers that he is *being*. He answers in the first-person singular of the verb *to be*. **I am**. Some versions of scripture give it a future translation. "I will be who I will be". **God is not just alive, God is Life**. That's why 'A New Creed' says: "We believe in God who has created and is creating".

When we talk about God being sovereign we immediately recognize that *we are not*. That God is big and we are small, or as the song "Jesus Loves Me" says: "I am weak but he is strong". When we recognize the sovereignty of God—the Almighty-ness of God—we are willing to bend our knee and say "My Lord and my God!", like Thomas exclaimed when he met the Risen Christ face to face.

And yet, when I think of God as sovereign, as 'in control and ruling over all', I think it's wonderful, but in the next instant, I hit a wall. But, but... if that is true — then **why? Why all this suffering?**

Why did Rebecca's car break down when she has so little money so that she can't get to school? Why was an active man diagnosed with ALS? Why did the poorest of the poor get slammed by a hurricane? Why 2 years ago was the body of a little boy named Alan Kurdi found washed up on a beach as his family fled from war? Why did my young vibrant friend die of cancer? Immediately the 'why's' hit.

There is a kid's camp song that goes "My God is so big, so strong and so mighty, there's nothing my God cannot do... for you and you and you." But if God is so big, why doesn't God fix things?

The answers to this enormous question are not very satisfying, and the truth is we really won't be answered until we pass from life, through

death and into eternal life. I always appreciated the children's stories that Pastor Stewart had when he would bring in some ants or bugs and ask the kids to explain to the ants how to do something. We can't! Ant brains are too small — or perhaps ours are... maybe it is we who are too limited to speak in 'ant'. But part of the way that theologians try to explain this conundrum of an omnipotent God (all powerful) in the face of suffering, is through free will. God does not force relationship on his creation. Love isn't love if it is forced upon another.

It's interesting that Moses notices the burning bush. He sees the bush and then he sort of takes a second look. There's a sense that he might well have seen it but not really taken notice of it. He might have walked by and missed this incredible "God sighting". The scripture reading says: "*Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!"*" It's only when Moses notices the presence of God that God calls out to him. So even God's presence is not forced on us—it's up to us to notice and to seek out God's presence.

In that 'God Sighting' of the burning bush, a relationship is formed. God knows Moses by name from the start, but Moses doesn't know God. At the end of the encounter he asks for God's name, and God tells him his name — which is an intimate thing to do. To know each other by name is a sign and the beginning of relationship.

I do not claim to understand it fully, but there is a sense that that incredible relationship offered to us would not be possible if God acted like a great gamer or droid operator in the sky. It is our very ability to **choose** to notice or not notice God, and to **choose** to have a relationship or not have a relationship with God, which makes the love and the intimate relationship possible.

Throughout the Bible there is a sense of being in this in-between-time where there is suffering. Throughout the Bible there is a longing for our true home, and a yearning for that perfect time where there is no suffering. As Isaiah chapter 11 talks about how one day 'the wolf and the lamb will lie down together...' one day '***They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.***' (Isaiah 11:9). One day there will be no hurt and no suffering. One day we will understand and be full of the knowledge of the Lord. ... but we're not there yet. One day you will be. And one day we believe all creation will be. But for now there is pain and suffering and hurt.

Just because God is big does not mean he doesn't care. We believe that God is sovereign *and* we believe that God knows and cares about our suffering. When Moses turns to the burning bush and the Lord speaks to him, the **first thing** he says to Moses, after telling him he is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, is "***I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry... I know their sufferings.***" (Ex 3:7)

God loves you and knows your pain. He knows the small anxieties you have about money; he knows your grief; he knows the incredible weight and the burdens that you carry; he knows the pain that is in your heart."

It's amazing! This Holy God says that he has heard the cry of his people, and then he says "*I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey...*" (Ex 3:8) So God hears the cry, he cares and he has come to the rescue. "*Al rescate!*" as Dora and Diego would say. But what is God's plan to deliver the people? It's an 80-year-old murderer who has fled Egypt and has isolated himself in the desert for years! God's plan is Moses. 'C'mon God! You've got to be kidding!' And it's not like Moses was jumping up and down saying "Pick me! Pick me!" As you know, Moses was more than a little reluctant and the journey to get them out of Egypt and then across a desert and into that Promised Land was brutal and took about 40 years. This was no quick fix. But God used that difficult time to make a nation, to build their faith.

I want to close by telling you a story and giving you a picture that might help you to understand a bit more God's sovereignty and God's love for you and for the trials you are going through.

Heather Eyerly was an active member of this congregation and a vibrant leader in the community. She passed away in June at the age of 46 from an aggressive breast cancer. We had a wonderful Celebration of her life here at the church on a hot July Tuesday. And the church was packed and filled with such wonderful music—it really was a wonderful tribute to her incredible life.



Last summer when Heather was in hospital in Ottawa and not doing well at all, I visited and said a prayer with her. As I was praying, I just had this picture in my head. (I have learned to take note of any words or images or thoughts I have when I am in prayer.) The picture I had was of a small child with her arms and legs wrapped around her daddy, with her head leaning on his shoulder fully resting and

supported in his strong arms.

After the prayer I told Heather about that picture and she lost it... in a good way... she cried and cried. Then through the tears she told me that as I shared the image she had an instant memory of being put in her crib as a toddler for some kind of a time out (apparently Heather was not just a spirited adult, she was spirited all her life!) and she said she remembered after she had had a good cry or temper tantrum she would call out “Ok, I’m ready now!” and her dad would come and pick her up and hold her, and she would just surrender to that loving embrace, knowing she was safe and loved. She knew as I knew that the picture was about her dad, William, but it was also a picture of God calling her to rest in his loving embrace.

Heather had been “fighting” cancer so hard, and it seemed that God wanted her to know that in the same way that a toddler can’t be expected to understand or fix the problems of life, that she was called to trust the Lord to carry her through this. I know she felt the love of God that day, and it just radiated for quite a while. Heather had a wonderful faith. I believe that last June God carried Heather home, and she felt safe and secure and surrounded by love.

I think that is a wonderful picture to help us make sense of the Sovereignty of God in the midst of suffering.

Some of you are in that position now. You’ve been fighting so hard to understand and fighting to fix your problems or just fighting to survive. If that’s you, I want to encourage you to stop. Stop fighting, and turn and notice God’s presence. Stop and let yourself be supported and carried by the Lord God who created you, who knows you and knows how tired you are of fighting. Lean fully into the strong arms of God.

Remember: *The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want.* (Psalm 23)

Remember: *I have called you by your name and you are mine.* (Isaiah 43:1)

Remember: *The Lord is my helper. I will not be afraid.* (Hebrews 13:6)

Remember: *For I know the plans I have for you, plans for your welfare and not for harm.* (Jeremiah 29:11)

Remember: *For I am convinced that neither death nor life ...nor anything else in all creation, can separate you from the Love of God.”* (Romans 8:38-39)

Rest and remember, and then be ready. Though we are as limited in the grand scheme of things as a toddler — who was Moses compared to the Pharaoh of Egypt and his vast army?—Though we are weak, be ready because God who is strong wants and even needs to use you to help

bring hope and new life to the suffering of the person next to you, or across the world from you. You can't do everything, but with your hand in the hand of your Sovereign God, you can move mountains.

Thanks be to God. Amen.