Sunday, January 12, 1997
LIKE A DOVE
Mark 1:4-11

There are times in my daily life when I wonder why things in the world are the way they are. Has that also been your experience?

Why are there so many different kinds of creatures in our world? Couldn't the world get along with, say, 300,000 species of beetles instead of 500,000? What good are they?

Do gorillas and aardvarks go through mid-life crises?

I wonder, at this time of year, why all kinds of news reporters and editors try to choose and list the biggest or most important news stories of the year just past. What difference does it make anyway?

On a more serious note, I find myself wondering about God and the way God enters our world and our personal lives. Do you sometimes find yourself trying very hard to believe in God and God's goodness, and yet there are all kinds of voices inside you trying to convince you to stop believing?

Maintaining a strong belief in God and God's goodness does not always come easy. Last week, a young woman from our congregation telephoned me one evening at home and said she was having a difficult time with her belief in God, especially in God's goodness. She said she wanted very much to believe, and some of the time she did, but when she thought of all the pain and suffering in the world and in her own life, she concluded that believing in God and God's goodness doesn't always make much sense. I told her I was familiar with her experience. I, too, wonder why there is so much evil in the world, and I also wonder why there is so much goodness in the world.

There are many people we care about who hurt so much, individuals who seem to have much more trouble and pain than they deserve. Here's someone who, at the age of 24, is diagnosed with a devastating cancer and is not expected to live very long. There are stories in the news almost every day about a child who has been severely abused by his or her parents. I read about a mother who had been indicted for killing all of her five children, one by one, before each had reached its fifth birthday. During those years, many people had suspicions, but no one took any action. It makes us wonder about God and God's goodness.

While it's true that many people create their own miseries, we also know there is no adequate rational explanation for much of the evil and suffering in the world.

What we all want to discover and experience, like the young woman who spoke with me on the telephone, is "deep down" believing. We want to discover and experience the spirit and power of God in our lives. We want the assurance that we are good, that God is good, and that life is good. The young woman who telephoned me said she could recite all the classical arguments for the existence of God, but she still wanted to experience the kind of believing that lets her know in the deep spaces of her soul that God is good and God's love is constant, even when her head tells her that there's a lot wrong in the world.

I asked the young woman to give me some examples of the kind of “deep believing” she was after. She said, “When I can feel and know that I am loved while everything around me seems to say I am unlovable, then I am truly believing. When I can feel gratitude enough to make me glad, then I am believing. When I know and feel that all is right with me, even when everything around me is the pits, then I will be truly believing. Then I will know that God’s spirit is a part of me.”

She went on to say, “I know it is the testimony of our Christian faith that God’s Spirit takes hold of us and can be discovered and experienced in bad times and in good, in sorrow and in joy. But why does it seem to come and go?”

I said to the young woman that she was asking the right questions and was heading in the right direction. She had used the words “discover” and “experience” God’s Spirit. She was not talking about “achievement.” She was not trying to gain “deep down” believing by trying harder. In order to discover God’s Spirit in our lives and in the world at large, it’s mostly a matter of being open to God’s Spirit and allowing that Power to work in our lives.

Here’s a story that has been very helpful to me over the years.

Many years ago, there lived in Cracow, Poland, a Rabbi named Eisik who dreamed three times that there was a treasure buried beneath a particular bridge in the city of Prague.

After the third dream, Eisik finally walked the long distance to Prague. When he found the bridge, the captain of the soldiers guarding the bridge asked him why he had come. Eisik told him of his three dreams. The captain replied that if he had faith in dreams, he would have gone to Cracow long ago, when he dreamed that there was a treasure buried in the ground under the stove of a Jew named Eisik.

When Rabbi Eisik heard this, he left immediately, walked the long journey home, and dug up the treasure under his kitchen stove.

This story, which dates back to the 8th century, is about all of us. We tend to think the treasure we’ve been looking for is somewhere else, when all the time it is under the kitchen stove at home. Or we think the treasure is something to be achieved by our own effort.

There are people who look all over the world in exotic places and strange religious movements but frequently miss the Spirit of God at home, in their everyday lives and ordinary, commonplace experiences. Remember, Jesus said, “The Spirit of God is in the midst of you, within you and among you.” The Apostle Paul said, “God is not far from any one of us, for in God we live and move and have our being.”

A few weeks ago, we celebrated Christmas, which reminds us each year that we discover God in the commonplace. The shepherds and the wise men found God in a baby in a manger. When he was an adult, Jesus rediscovered the Spirit of God in his life, and it is described not in a momentous or earth-shaking event, but “like a dove descending on him.” It reminds me of Elijah, who, in the darkest time of his life, was hiding in a cave and thought God had completely forgotten and deserted him. He discovered God not in the earthquake or the fire, but in a “still small voice,” or, to put it another way, in a still, small, silent assurance that God was with him. It came to Elijah at the lowest point in his life. It was like a dove.

What the Bible is talking about in all these instances is the gift of God’s grace.

This gift of God's spirit, or God's grace, which came to Jesus "like a dove," is the assurance that life can be all right even when everything in it seems all wrong. Frequently, God's affirmation of us comes through the experience of another person affirming and accepting us.

I am not talking here about some kind of magic that automatically makes everything all right in an instant. What the gift of God's grace does is to show us that it is good for us to live, that life is a blessing, that it is truly good, wonderful even, for us to be breathing and feeling, even when there are many things clustering around us that are not good.

God's Spirit, which we call grace, is everywhere and always present. The more you are open to it, the more you experience it. The winds of grace are always blowing, but you have to raise the sail or broaden the sail.

To put it another way, the gift of God's grace does not cure all our cancers, transform all our children into winners, or send us all soaring into success. Grace is, rather, an amazing power to look earthly reality full in the face, see its sad and tragic edges, life's unfairness, and yet feel and know in our deepest being that life is good and it is right for us to be alive in God's creation. That's why we call it "amazing grace."

It will help us to understand and to more fully discover the gift of God's grace in our lives if we look at it from three different angles.

First, grace is PARDON. We experience and discover the gift of God's grace whenever we come to know that it is all right for us personally — that we are okay — even though we know that a lot of things are wrong in our lives. In other words, even though our lives do not always match our dreams, God loves us and accepts us. That's the gift of grace.

Unfortunately, some expressions of religion do not help us discover this gift. Anytime your religious faith clobbers you for your failures and sends you away groveling in defeat, it is not helping you discover the gift of God's grace.

Not long ago, I spoke with a woman who had recently gone through a painful divorce and felt condemned by a religion without grace. She said, "I know I will never be able to forgive myself." I tried to help her understand that God does not condemn us for our mistakes — that God always forgives us, even before we ask. She needed to discover the gift of God's grace, and in time she did, and it changed her.

Second, God's grace is POWER, the power to lead you closer to God's image, which is already in you, and to make you a better person than you were yesterday. Grace does not make us better people by bullying us into moral improvement.

When you are freed by pardoning grace, that same power begins to work to make you right. The moment we know it's all right, even though we were terribly in the wrong, we are freed from our private burden of failures and given the power to become the sort of person God wants us to be and the sort of person we want to be.

The straitjacket of self-hatred is off, the shackles of self-judgment are ripped away, God's power is set loose within us, and we are on the way to becoming the person we were meant to be.

Third, God's grace is PROMISE. God's grace is the power to live now because we know that things are going to be all right in the future — that's the PROMISE.

There are many people who desperately need the power to live by promise. I meet people all the time who tell me they feel like they are locked in a car going full speed down a steep hill with the steering wheel locked and no brakes.

I also meet people who live in fear, as if they are on a small ledge halfway up a steep cliff, afraid to move. They are hanging onto the side of the cliff with their fingers and feel as if they no longer have the strength to hold on. Such people need the promise that tomorrow is going to be better than today.

To people like these, and to every one of you who has lost touch with God's good intentions for your future, you can have the gift of God's grace. It's there waiting to descend on you like a dove. It's a gift of pardon, power, and promise.

God's gift of grace is amazing because it works against the grain of common sense. Grace promises that you can trust God for a better tomorrow than the day you have made for yourself.

You would be making a mistake, of course, if you expected everything to happen at once — instant, full-blown. It may come in fragments, a nudge of power here and a ray of hope there. It may happen in one segment of your life at a time; do not look for the whole story to be told in one chapter.

You may experience grace and then lose it and need to discover it all over again. But God's gift of grace is always there waiting and ready — you can be sure of that. All you need is to be open and ready to receive it.

There's an old Irish legend of a ruler who wished to leave his kingdom to the cleverest of his three sons. He took the first son on a long journey. On the way, he said, "Son, shorten the road for me." The oldest son was overwhelmed by the task, gave up, and they returned home. The king embarked on the same journey with the second son and said again, "Son, shorten the journey for me." Like his older brother, the boy was daunted by the request, gave up, and they too returned home. The king then took the youngest son on the long journey. Once again, he said, "Son, shorten the journey for me." The youngest launched into a story so long and engrossing that, before the king knew it, he had completed the journey.

That's how God's grace often works. It doesn't lessen the number of miles on the road, even though God loves us unconditionally. Nor does God walk that long way for us. But like that king on the road, having God walk along with us can make the long, sometimes lonely, walk seem shorter and make all our journeys, however difficult, infinitely more bearable.

Coming to us like a dove, God says to each one of us, as God said to Jesus, "You are my child, my beloved; with you I am well pleased." Amen.