

January 9, 2010

PLAYING WITH A THUNDERSTORM

How much of God do you want? That's the question I want to think with you about today. How much of God do you want?

Wilbur Rees grew up crooked. When he was a very young boy he contracted tuberculosis of the spine that disintegrated two of his vertebrae that caused his spine to severely curve, making him a crooked boy. In the first several years of life he underwent excruciating treatments to straighten his back, alternating between a full body cast and being stretched onto a Bradford frame. It didn't do much good and he was left with a permanent hitch in his back which he now calls a hunchback. On top of that his father was not such a nice man. Wilbur was treated cruelly. His home was devoid of religion. His father threatened harm if Wilbur should ever darken the door of a church. So when Wilbur finally learned how to walk (which didn't happen until he was eight) his rebellion against his father came in his going to church. He went to church to spite his father. But there is where Wilbur met God. And there is where Wilbur discovered that this God, who for some reason had allowed a world where he could contract tuberculosis, had allowed a world where his back could grow misshapen, had allowed him to be made fun of by just about every kid with whom he had contact, had allowed him to be

subjected to the cruel hand of a mean father, this God whom Wilbur met in church had something huge in store for him. This God, quite to Wilbur's surprise, had plans to call Wilbur into the ministry and to make him into a preacher and a pastor and a congregational leader. He went to seminary, met a wonderful woman, got married and was ordained. And that was a long time ago. Wilbur is now 84 years old. He has served churches in four states. He has been married 59 years. He has three children and five grandchildren. He has even written a book.

Yes, Wilbur still has a 90-degree angle to his back. But now when Wilbur looks back on his life he is overwhelmed by this God he met in church. The door of which he was not supposed to darken. He is overwhelmed by this God and what this God can do. And Wilbur worries that there are many, many people who have no idea of how overwhelming and wonderful this God is. Or worse still, that we do know how overwhelming and wonderful this God could be but we do not avail ourselves of him. That we want only "so much" of God. He worries that in our approach toward God we might want too little and that our spirituality is nothing more than an attempt to skim just off the surface of the deep and mysterious and overwhelming God. He says it best in this little poem. A poem suggestive of how little we want of God.

"I would like to buy \$3 worth of God, please; not enough to explode my soul or disturb my sleep, but just enough to equal a cup of warm milk or a snooze in the sunshine. I don't want enough of God to make me love someone who is different from me or to give too much of

myself away. I want ecstasy, not transformation; I want the warmth of the womb, not a new birth. I want a pound of the eternal in a paper sack. I would like to buy \$3 worth of God please.”

How much of God do you want?

I wonder if that isn't a question that lies somewhere at the heart of our spiritual journey ... our spirituality. How much of God do you want?

I don't know about you but when I think about how much of God I want I usually only want as much of God as I think I can manage. Isn't that the way it usually goes? Life I suspect for most of us is something that we feel like we have to manage. We manage our time, we manage our schedules, we manage our homes, we manage our employees, we manage our money, we manage our careers, we manage people and we manage events. Life is something to be managed. And so when it comes to God, isn't it often the case that we want as much of God as we are able to manage? As much as we can manage into our schedules, into our routines, into our bank accounts, into our calendars or into our prayer time. We want as much of God as we can manage.

And so because this is the case, because we so often come at God as someone or something to be managed, to be managed into our lives, what we force ourselves to do is to caste for ourselves a mold or an image of God that we think will best fit into the place in our lives that we have managed to leave open for God. We have this great temptation to make for ourselves a god that will fit into the space we have created for God --our God space. And not only are we tempted to create a god that conforms or fits into the particular space, but often want a god that will support and complement all the other things we are trying to manage. We know God is almighty and all-powerful, so we try to get this almighty and all-powerful God to align himself with our particular projects or opinions.

It's like that New Yorker cartoon where the businessman is kneeling down beside his bed in prayer and he says, "Anyway, we'd love to have you on board for the Creighton deal."

You see if we come at life as something to be managed then we are tempted to come at God as someone to be managed. And if we are tempted to come at God as someone to be managed then we are tempted to caste or create in our minds an image or a mold of God that will fit into all the other things we are trying to control -- and not only fit into them but to support them as well.

If, for example, you are overly occupied trying to manage your career eventually you are going to create or caste for yourself a God that you can manage to fit into your career -- a god that will somehow come on board with you to make you successful.

Or if you are overly occupied, let's say with getting people to agree with you or to somehow manage them into your opinion, then you will be tempted to create or caste for yourself a god that first of all fits not only into your opinion, but also a god that will judge everybody else and tell them that they're wrong.

Or if you are overly occupied with becoming a success and if you have determined already in your mind what a success is, and let's say for example that success in part for you is making a lot of money and you are managing yourself that way, well then sooner or later you are going to need a god that you can manage to have say to you that storing up treasures on earth is really a good thing. A god who will whisper in your ear that success is really all about you.

We managers, you see, are so busy managing that one of our great struggles, one of our great temptations, is to approach God as one more thing to be managed and thus create for ourselves a very manageable God that we can manage right into that little space we have managed to leave open.

And I wonder if all this is not behind the second commandment when God commands that we are not to create for ourselves any type of idols or graven images. That is to say that we are not to make any attempt to create for ourselves an image of god that we can see or bow down to. It sounds like what we have here is a God who doesn't want to be managed. It sounds like what we have here is a God who does not want anyone trying to reduce him into something that can be seen or held or possessed or controlled ... or managed. What God is trying to say in commandment #2 is that God is unmanageable. God is bigger than the effort we might put forth to contain him.

Imagine with me an unmanageable God! Imagine with me a God who will not conform to your schedule. Imagine with me a God who may not agree with your definition of success. Imagine with me a God who may have a whole different idea for your life than the one you presently have for yourself. Imagine with me a God who is presently preparing to dislodge from you a dearly held conviction. Imagine with me a God who is trying to tell you that you have it all wrong. Imagine with me a God who is so holy, so majestic, so perfect, so terrible in splendor that if we were to even peek at him we would spontaneously combust. Imagine with me a God that none of us can quite fit into our little minds and hearts. Imagine with me an unmanageable God.

Don't you love that scene in Isaiah when Isaiah has that vision of God in the temple? It is a very unmanageable vision. It is a vision that I can't quite get my mind and heart around. The Lord high and lifted up, sitting on a throne, his train filling the temple, six-winged seraphs, the room filled with smoke, and the pivots shaking at the voices of the heavenly creatures. That's not what usually happens when I go to prayer! It's a God, you see, that I can't quite reduce down to size. It's a God that makes me tremble. It's a God that makes me say, "Woe is me, I am a man of unclean lips."

And it all sort of begs the question doesn't it? The question of spirituality. How much of God do you really want? Do you really want to come into the full and abiding presence of the Almighty? Are you prepared to have God blow apart your schedule, your plans, your opinions, your definitions or your categories? Are you prepared to go into your Bible and start reading things in there about God that you may not like? Are you ready to read stories that may not fit into your story? Are you ready to hear commands that might change plans? Are you ready for this unmanageable God who may demote you from manager?

I love what Annie Dillard had to say about how blithely we approach and invoke the power of God. She says, "It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they

should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may awake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return.”

Jonathan Edwards, the great 18th century American preacher, wrote that the times he felt closest to God were when thunderstorms would appear on horizon. At the first hint of the darkness, Edwards would make for the fields and watch as the sky grew black and the wind picked up, thunder rumbled and lightning flashed across the sky. The fiercer the storm the better. And he would tell of how as the wind blew and the thunder crashed and the lightning pealed he would sing and chant his meditations.

Makes me think of Lucy in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* when she comes into contact with the newly resurrected Aslan, the lion figure in the book who represents God. And the lion invites her and the children to romp a while and Lucy describes it like playing with a kitten as much as with a thunderstorm.

I wonder about that when it comes to you and me and our spirituality. There's so much of us that wants to make God solely into a kitten. A gentle God that we want to keep gentle all the time so as to manage him and make him into what we want him to be. And it's not that God cannot be gentle -- for he very often is when he needs to be for us fragile children.

But let us not be tempted. Let us not make for ourselves a graven image -- an idol. Let's not try to put God in a \$3 sack. For God is as much a thunderstorm as he is anything else we would have him be. God will not be managed, no more than we could grab a bolt of lightning or still the wind or quiet the thunder.

Remember in the book of Job when the suffering Job and his friends get through with their complaints and laments the author tells us that God came to meet Job. And he met him in a whirlwind – a violent whirlwind. And God's first question to Job is: "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?" Doesn't sound like a God who wants much managing?

Who's to know what our spirituality could be if we would dare to ask God to give us all he has, to give us all he is. Lord, I want you! I want all that you are! Imagine what might truly happen if we would release him from our \$3 sack – and ask him to speak?