

August 7, 2011

## **COUNTING ON GOD TO SHOW UP**

The story is told of a company of paratrooper s in training to learn how to jump and parachute. They were preparing for their first jump. They had been trained to pack their chutes. They had been instructed about the appropriate way to land. They had been taught how to guide their flight to the appropriate landing target. The Sergeant was giving the last instructions before they boarded the plane: Remember gentlemen, he said, when you get to that door you jump. No freezing, you jump. If you freeze in the door the Lieutenant will kick you right out. When you're out you count to five and pull the first cord. If by chance your chute does not open, you pull your reserve cord. When you land the trucks will be there to bring you back to the base. So the company made their way to the planes. When they got to the jump zone the line began to jump. One man, however, froze at the door. "Jump Private," yelled the Sergeant. He stayed frozen. With that the sergeant kicked him out the door. Now in the air the private counted to five and pulled his cord. Nothing happened. No chute opened. So he counted to five again and he pulled the reserve cord. Nothing again. No chute unfurling. So the man continued hurtling to the earth without benefit of parachute. No more cords to pull. And

with that he thought to himself ... just my luck ... I bet those trucks won't be there to take us back to the base, either.

Who are you counting on to show up?

You know how you live your life has a lot to do with who you are counting on to show up. **Woody Allen said that 90 % of life is just showing up.** Life is a calculated risk on who is going to be there for me either in the moment, or in the end. From the very beginning of our days, life is a self-education on who is going to show up. Kids are trying to figure that out all the time. Can I count on my parents to show up? Can I count on my friends to show up? Can I count on my significant other to show up?

I performed a wedding here last night. A couple stood before God and made promises to each other. Exchanged vows and rings. And in essence said to each other – I am counting on you to show up. In plenty and in want. In joy and in sorrow. In sickness and in health. I am counting on you to show up.

A lot of the debates in Washington we now watch on TV have a lot to do with the question – who is going to show up? What can I count on the government for? What should I count on the government for? Will my Social Security be there when I grow old? If I get sick who will help me pay the hospital bill? If we are attacked who will be there to protect us? Who can we count on to show up?

Good question.

Just after World War II Samuel Beckett wrote and staged his groundbreaking play *Waiting for Godot* – a play that features two characters waiting for the appearance of God. And the question that hangs above the play throughout ... is the question, “Is God going to show up? Will God show up in the end? Will the wait of these two characters be worth it in the end? Will God finally make his appearance on the stage?” The conclusion is not very satisfying.

But it is the question the hangs above your life and mine, isn't it? Can I count on God to show up? Or should I hedge my bet? Should I have for myself a little insurance? Should I provide for the possibility that I am in this thing on my own?

It was the dilemma the leader Ezra faced. As the people of God are assembled in Babylon preparing for the second wave of return to Jerusalem. They have been given release by the King - **King Artaxerxes** - and they are freed to return to Jerusalem. But between Babylon and Jerusalem there are hosts of people who do not wish for the Israelites return. Enemies who want their destruction. But Ezra believes that they are on a mission from God. They are doing the right thing in returning to Jerusalem and rebuilding the temple. And that God is on their side. And so the dilemma is ... does Ezra trust that God will provide for his people the protection they need to get to Promised Land? Or should Ezra hedge his bet and ask protection from the king? "I was ashamed," Ezra says, "to ask the king for a band of soldiers and cavalry to protect us against the enemy on our way, since we had told the king that the hand of our God is gracious to all who seek him." So Ezra calls for a fast. Ezra calls for the people of God to deny themselves before God to seek from the Lord a safe journey. "So we fasted," Ezra says, "and petitioned our God for his protection, and God listened to our entreaty." And so the people pursue the mission of God and the mission of God is realized. They arrive in Jerusalem and set themselves to begin rebuilding the temple. And they rejoice that God has shown up. But you know they really wouldn't have know whether God would show up ... until they took the chance. Had they hedged their bets ... who's to know whether it was God or the king? But it is in risking the mission ... risking the mission of God ... that they saw God show up.

It is story that gets told over and over again in scripture ... when people pursue the mission of God ... God somehow shows up. When people pursue the mission of God, God somehow shows up.

A couple of months ago I stood on top of Mt. Carmel in Northern Israel. Mt. Carmel looks out upon the Valley of Armageddon and is the site where Elijah the prophet took on the prophets of Baal. Takes this huge risk and challenges the prophets of Baal to a contest to prove whose God was really God. And he bests them in this contest. But all that does is that it makes the wicked king and queen very angry. And they want Elijah's head. And now Elijah is a fugitive. And he runs. He runs and he runs and he runs until he gets to the end of his rope. He falls exhausted and wishes for his own death. He's carried out the mission, he's taken the risk, but where is God? Discouraged, he faints into a sleep. And just when you think the curtain is going to fall, Scripture says he is awakened by an angel and the angel feeds him. And angel feeds him! When you risk the mission, God somehow shows up.

Remember the story of Moses and the Israelites making their journey across the wilderness? And it takes them just two years to cross the dessert until they get to the edge of the Promised Land. And Moses sends spies ahead to check out what the inhabitants of the land look like. And they come back and they say that the Canaanites are giants. The enemy is too

big. They don't stand a chance. The mission will fail. Only Caleb among the spies offers a different report. He says to Moses, we can do it. We're on a mission from God ... and when we are on a mission from God, God shows up. But Moses decides not to risk it. Not to take the chance. Hedge his bet for a while. Retreat back into the wilderness. And the people wander for another 38 years. Hedging your bet can keep you wandering. Can keep you from an encounter with God.

The truth is you and I spend a lot of time worrying about the possibility that God will not show up. We spend a lot of our time planning for the possibility that God will not show up. We spend a lot of our time protecting ourselves from the possibility that God will not show up. And before we know it ... our mission in life turns out to be the mission of hedging our bets. The mission of doing what we can with the expectation that God will not, in fact, show up.

We play it safe. Our mission in life is to play it safe. Prepare for the possibility that God won't show up. And then we wonder, why hasn't God shown up?

So Micah the prophet says – “You want God to show up? Here is what the Lord requires: Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.”

Do justice. Make sure everyone gets a fair shake. Love kindness. Make sure that everyone gets another chance. Walk humbly with your God. Make sure you are on a mission from God. Make sure that you are risking yourself to be about God's mission.

And we say to ourselves: "Yeah, but what if I do those things and God doesn't show up?" And God says – You don't understand. When you do the mission of God ... I do show up ... if in no other way ... than in you!! I show up in you! No, it's not that God keeps us always from harm. It's not that God promises a rose garden. It's not that we are immune from the dangers of the world – it's just that we are so convinced in the mission of God – that we are willing even to endure those things – because we know that it is in our mission, God's mission, that God shows up if only through us. And that's what disciples do – they do the mission of God ... so that God will show up in the world.

In the summer before my last year of seminary I moved to Washington with Amanda my wife. We didn't have much money – so I needed a summer job pretty badly. But every attempt at a decent paying job failed. Every door of gainful employment closed. I was looking at three months of nothing. Someone told me about a ministry in inner-city Washington that might need some help. So there I went. They offered me a job. A job without pay. Lord, I said, I need

some money. Trust me, God said, you need something more than money. So begrudgingly I took the job without pay. The ministry was to the low-income elderly up off 14<sup>th</sup> St. in the red light district of Washington. Every day as I watched my bank account grow smaller I was sent by the director to walk the neighborhoods to find the elderly who had fallen far below the poverty line. The director sent me in particular to visit a Mrs. Welborn who lived in a ninth floor apartment of a run down inner city project. And Mrs. Welborn for a long time had been neglected. Painfully neglected. She had become mentally ill. She could not care for herself. She had no family or friends. She was violent by nature. Her apartment was roach infested. She had sores on her body that were bigger than my fist. She had had several “accidents” that had not been cleaned up. Despite 95-degree days she refused to open a window to her non-air-conditioned apartment. I understood why she had no friends, the first time I visited her she attempted to attack me. I went back to the director and told her I wasn’t going back. She said, Yes you are. I said, You know I didn’t bargain for this job. She said, I don’t care, you’re going back. I visited her dozens of times **trying to get her some help** and it felt like every time I visited that all the symptoms of a broken and sinful world had come to roost in that woman and in that place. If there was ever a thing called hell-on-earth I think I experienced it whenever I walked into apartment 904. And I must confess to you something ... Mrs. Welborn wore me out. I got real discouraged. Over three months little progress was made. At the end of the summer I said to the director, what was the point of you sending me there every week? She said because it’s the mission. Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly. **And guess what**

you've been doing – walking humbly. And God showed up, Steve. Through an ever so begrudgingly and reluctant servant ... God showed up. A month after I returned to seminary Mrs. Welborn agreed to be taken to the hospital where she was cared for – mind, body and soul.

So the prophet says: The mission is to do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly with God in the world. Do this and God will show up.

In Martin Luther King's great essay, "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence" he reflects on his experience of God in the midst of his struggle and he says this:

Perhaps the suffering, frustration and agonizing moments which I have had to undergo occasionally as a result of my involvement in a difficult struggle have drawn me closer to God. Whatever the cause, God has been profoundly real to me in recent months. In the midst of outer dangers I have felt an inner calm and known resources of strength that only God could give. In many instances I have felt the power of God transforming the fatigue of despair into the buoyancy of hope. I am convinced that the universe is under the control of a loving purpose and that in the struggle for righteousness man has cosmic companionship."

In the struggle for righteousness man has cosmic companionship.

You know the truth is ... sometimes we don't see God showing up in our lives because we have spent a lifetime preparing for the possibility that he won't. In sitting out the struggle for righteousness we give up on the cosmic companionship. In stepping away from justice and mercy and humility – we step away from the Creator. And then we wonder why God doesn't show up?

I love that story my granddaddy used to tell about the little Iowa town that had suffered from months and months of drought. The crops were withering. The fields were dust. The people greatly discouraged. So the town's only pastor called for a prayer meeting for 6:00 Wednesday night – a prayer meeting to pray for rain. So at 6:00 on Wednesday the church bell pealed and the people of the town gathered in the shabby little church. Every pew was filled. The people were going to pray for rain. The preacher got up and looked out on the crowd. He looked as if he was studying each person that was there. Finally, the preacher spoke. I am sorry to inform you that this prayer meeting is over. I invite you all to leave. A murmur went through the congregation and finally someone stood and asked, "Why are you cancelling the prayer meeting and telling us to leave?" And the preacher said, "How can we pray for God to make it rain, if not one of us thought to bring an umbrella?"

How you live your life has a lot to do with who you believe is going to show up.