

The Elephant in the Room

Elephant in the room is an expression we are probably all familiar with. We use it for whatever overwhelms us in size, difficulty or complexity. Nowadays, *elephant* is a fitting image for current events in the world's economies, growing numbers of workplaces, and our lives.

Today's economics-related *elephant* can be approached from many directions. One way is to focus on executive compensation and risk-taking issues; another is on government regulation, monetary policy and business plans. Those directions take us into discussions on stewardship, ethics, justice, and common sense. While each of those needs to be dealt with, none adequately addresses the deeper issues of spiritual care, and the millions of people who are hurting. Their jobs, homes, savings, and futures are being trampled on by events beyond their control. Reasonably, everyone might ask: where is God in all of this, and what difference can God make in our lives, *now*?

Thanks be to God, we have compelling responses to *where* and *what difference* from Isaiah 64:1-9 - which, ironically, is part of the Church's celebration of its New Year (Advent). The reading's historical background is different from ours; but, its references to hurting people are very familiar. With that in mind, may Isaiah's message encourage us, and inspire us in our faith in God.

Many centuries ago, the Jewish people returned home after a lengthy exile in Babylon. Their initial excitement quickly melted into despair over the devastation they found. Their cities and villages were in ruins. Their farms, vineyards and orchards had become weed-infested wastelands. Their businesses had been looted and stripped of assets. Understandably, many people became so discouraged, their spirits broke. They felt betrayed and abandoned by God.

Isaiah, who was God's and the people's prophet, responded. God and Isaiah took four steps, together. Each step helped Isaiah recognize: our difficulties = God's opportunities. God is faithful, believable and dependable.

Isaiah's first step was *prayer*. In prayer, Isaiah let God have it! He cried out loudly in anguish over what he saw, heard and felt. He laid his feelings bare before God, and didn't hold back how he expressed them. Psychologists would probably commend him for good self-care, and they're correct. Scripture takes their point further, calling it honesty in one's relationship with God.

Isaiah's next step was *remembrance*. He recalled the ways that he and the people had experienced God in the past. God had been their faithful companion, extravagant benefactor, invincible defender, national liberator and practical teacher. In particular, Isaiah remembered the people's encounters with God at Mount Sinai. It was from Sinai that God gave Moses so much inspiration and direction to bless the people.

Remembering God's past works helped Isaiah take his next step. He recognized that God is *faithful*. God had always been present with people, through bad times (slavery in Egypt) and good (the Promised Land). In good times, Isaiah recognized that it is easy to see God's hand of blessing. In bad times, however, he recognized that it is human (normal) to perceive God as abandoning us. The reality is that God is always faithful.

Prayer and remembrance of God's faithfulness helped rekindle Isaiah's relationship with God. Then, he was ready to take his third step, *confession*. He recognized the role of sin in separating people from God. God had warned the people repeatedly to clean up their act. If they continued to pursue other gods and values, they would reap consequences. It is not God who leaves us; we separate ourselves from God.

Although Isaiah had not participated in the sins leading to Babylonian exile - he was an innocent victim - he decided to confess his sins, and the sins of the people whom he served. Yes, the Babylonians had caused the people's woes. But it was sin which had brought on so much suffering - on the innocent and the sinners.

Confession opens the soul for God's cleansing and restoration to begin. After Isaiah's confession, God began a new chapter in Isaiah's and the people's lives. God helped them recognize, in prayer and through Isaiah's prophecies, how committed God is to our well-being. God does not want us to be an elephant's victims. God is infinitely willing to rescue and recreate us, as a potter takes up clay and (re)moulds it.

At the conclusion of Isaiah's reading, I sense his recognition of something profound and practical. God didn't give anyone a quick fix. Rather, God offered everyone a way through today's difficulties into tomorrow. God faithfully and personally leads people forward. God gives hope and encouragement to the discouraged. God points to Scripture and history to assure people. God's point is: our difficulties = God's opportunities.

D. Browning
Advent, 2008