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Sermon for the Eighth Sunday After Pentecost
 Church of the Holy Comforter
 Charlotte, NC
 July 26, 2009, 8:30 AM
 Proper 12
 Cycle B RCL

Text : λΥμ-λε) η(φΨιρΥ·)-τε) Υ-βφη ρΠομ)∇λ ρεπ∧∇ΣαB β↔οT:κΓΨ(ω
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And he wrote in the scroll saying, "Put Uriah at the forefront of the hardest fighting and [then] pull back from him so that he will be struck down and die."
 (2 Samuel 11:15, FLH)

I

Everybody knows the hosts of heaven can read. From the pyramids of Egypt to the Parthenon in Athens, the ancients inscribed prayers and stories, myths and laws upon temples and palaces—not so that a largely illiterate populace could read them, but so that the gods could read them. Writing was a powerful way to address heaven, and sometimes the craft of writing was localized in temples so as to protect this divine script. Even the graffiti of Roman Palestine is prayerful. Instead of "Herod slept here," badly spelled, a Palestinian father might write, "God, save my child"—also badly spelled. "Lord, have mercy" became a favorite scribble on walls as Christianity began to spread.

What you write you write to God and to all the hosts of heaven.

When he wrote out his letter, sealed it up, and handed it to Uriah the Hittite to take to his commander in Rabbah, King David might as well have taken out a full-page ad in the *Heavenly Times-Picayune*. The small parchment scroll was both a death warrant for Uriah and a signed confession by David.

David thought he had gotten rid of the Lord of Hosts—at least for awhile. The throne of God, called the Ark of the Covenant, was now on the killing fields of Rabbah so that the mighty arm of Israel's God could join the strong arms of the king's soldiers in subduing the Ammonites. Yahweh of Hosts was about 80 miles away fighting Ammonites, as David saw things. David was wrong.

II

Wrong or not, however, I'm no stranger to David's delusion? Do I actually live as though there were a God in town who might read my intentions as clearly as God read David's? Or do I, like the fool of Psalm 14 (=Psalm 53), live as though a moral absence surrounded me, a divine absence, an absence of meaning and an absence of hope?

God's in the Middle East, fighting Al-Qaida, in Afghanistan, fighting the Taliban—isn't that right? Yes, God may visit the seats of world power and financial importance, but is there any God between Charlotte and Monroe, between Winston-Salem and Kernersville? What real difference does it make that some of our children attend well-appointed private schools for the rich and others have to do their best to learn on a state budget that is shrinking not because of a recession but because of our hardness of heart in the midst of a recession?

Without any God in town, it is just fine, isn't it, to dupe women and men who can barely feed their families with the 6 point type of a credit application? What God among us actually cares one way or another when we work to reduce our "tax liability" so as to throw the burden of paying for our government on those unable to reduce their "tax liability?" Would God actually know or care if modern slavers sold Asian women into sexual bondage? What God is there who could possibly care about my petty and mean-spirited choices in life?

A couple of years ago something happened that almost convinced me that there was no God in town at all. A 12-year-old boy, Demonte Driver, died in Largo, Maryland, as the result of a dental abscess that worked its way into his brain. Dentist after dentist had turned the child away because he could not pay the \$80 or so it might have cost to pull the tooth; but after his lingering death, social workers, state officials, and health professionals lamented the poor boy's death while pointing their fingers of blame at Demonte's mother for not understanding the seriousness of the child's affliction until it was too late and for failing to submit paperwork that might have reenrolled the family in Medicaid. Maybe Medicaid would have paid for treatment if Ms. Driver had been able to find one of the few dentists in her area who actually accepted Medicaid.

What made me feel, though, that I had descended to the uttermost depths of Dante's Inferno was the equanimity with which the officials responsible for this child's life all excused themselves. Children do get sick and die. Men do force their attentions on women and produce unwanted pregnancies. But to make an innocent man pay for the king's evil with his own innocent life is beyond anything I can imagine. And if there had been a God in town, if the LORD of Hosts had taken up residence in Maryland once more, would dozens of well-educated, church-going, upstanding citizens have let Demonte die through their hard-hearted wickedness and then point accusing fingers at Demonte's grieving mother?

III

The good news, though, is that God *can* read. God could read the writings of David and penetrate beyond them to read his heart. Wherever the Ark is found or the Eucharistic feast is celebrated, God reads. God reads the secret writings we hide in our bruised consciences even from ourselves. God reads the evil we intend to do and the wickedness we have done. The good news in Christ is that God has already done something about that. God has sent a Son to forgive us, written a book of salvation (Exodus 32:32-33) to redeem us. God had written our names in God's own book when we were yet unformed air and dust (Psalm 137:13-16):

The good news of God's literacy was good news for David and is still good news for the people of Maryland and for me. There is nothing to pretend any longer. Whatever I thought I had so cleverly hidden from all is even now on display in the heavenly places for anyone and everyone to read. And on the Day of Judgment each entry will be read to me. So if my pretences of amiability, fairness, and good intentions fool somebody, they don't fool God or any citizen of God's kingdom. But Christ didn't die to save good people. He died to save people like me.

So I could, perhaps, choose very differently from the way I have chosen in the past. It wouldn't hurt to open myself to a little compassion, to a little joy, or to a little generosity. God already knows what I am. Can God help me be better than that? Can God help me raise a prophet's voice in my community and then follow that voice with actual deeds? Can God so redeem those who bear the burdens of public service to try to open themselves to the real lives they affect daily?

Everyone knows the hosts of heaven can read.

Amen