

Not much has changed between this week and last. Jesus is still on the mountain with his new disciples, Peter, Andrew, James, and John, drawing contrasts between life in this world versus life in the kingdom of God - and he is still without a Venn diagram.

Paul is still aggravated about the quarreling and division among the Corinthians. This week he reminds them they are called to be saints together. Together they lack no spiritual gift to build up their community; to live, here and now, in the kingdom of God. It is not ultimately about them - it is ultimately about the faithfulness of God.

While Micah has been replaced by a new prophetic voice, Isaiah, the concern remains the same, a lack of justice where the Israelites have the choice to act justly or not, even as they are subjected to the injustices of the world that surrounds them.

And I'm still thinking about that tattoo.

Apropos of our readings today, we may be frustrated about God's seemingly lack of engagement in righting the many wrongs of the world: what's happening in Minnesota and beyond, the Holy Land, Ukraine, gun violence, innocent lives ended through a variety of heinous acts, super storms, and super egos grabbing power for their own gain at the expense of so many. And we may ask, "where is God in this?"

For Isaiah that is a central question - how is God present in a context with so much misery, poverty, injustice, and infighting? As in Micah 6:8, Isaiah tells us we should understand God's presence in terms of God's justice. God prefers acts of justice and mercy over empty acts of worship. God desires whatever we do on Sunday to extend into the rest of the week. In Isaiah there is a clear connection between justice and liberation and God's presence. To quote Isaiah, "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?"

Sally McFague, an American theologian, famously said, "If God is absent from this world, it is because we are." (Life Abundant, 151) And conversely, whenever people take up their vocation to see justice, to tend to those who suffer, God's presence breaks into the world.

Jesus is God present in the world and Jesus is deeply concerned with justice. Salt and Light are metaphors for the role the disciples will play in Jesus' command to make the kingdom of God visible to the people of God, the kingdom built upon God's love and justice.

For those of us who cook, salt has no value by itself. But when salt is added to any food it brings out, enhances flavor. The disciples are not fully themselves without Jesus and the kingdom of God. The same is true for us.

Light does not exist for itself. It exists to illuminate something else. The disciples exist to illuminate Jesus and the Kingdom of God. And so do we. "So let your light shine before others so they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." Love, justice, and peace give glory to God even as they pave the way for God's kingdom to exist here on earth, now and forever.

Jesus is not telling the disciples to try harder, but rather describing who they already are; to believe Jesus and to accept and live out the new reality already created in their call to discipleship. The same goes for us.

Now what about the law. What Jesus says next is the instructional core of the Sermon on the Mount. “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.”

The Law is the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, and the prophets are all including Isaiah and Micah. Together they express the authority of God’s kingdom ethics.

Jesus doesn’t abolish the law, but neither does he affirm the status quo. There is something wrong in the status quo or Jesus wouldn’t be here teaching about God’s alternative way of life - God’s kingdom testified to by the prophets but as yet incomplete.

As we see throughout the gospels, Jesus teaches the critical principle that mercy, justice, love, and covenant loyalty to God are more important than simple adherence to a set of rules.

Jesus himself is the revelation, the epiphany, of the will of God - God’s kingdom in heaven lived out on earth. As Jesus sits with the disciples, I imagine he is hoping for them to have an “aha moment.” We need to have one, too. The scribes and Pharisees are failing to understand. The disciples, and we, must not.

Instead of asking where God is in the miseries and injustices of the world, maybe we should consider Sally McFague more fully: “If God is absent from this world, it is because we are.” It might be good to consider how our actions, great and small, can play a role in mending the brokenness of the world as we are called to follow God in building a more just society, where no one is hungry, unhoused, unemployed, bullied, belittled, unsafe, unwelcome, or in any way excluded for any reason. Where all are recognized and respected as beloved children of God. There are so many ways through our own actions that we can make God present in the world as Jesus shows us, calls us. That may be exactly what God is waiting for.