*On Eagles’ Wings*

Isaiah 40:21-31

Yesterday my husband and I traveled down to Lansing to check up on our daughter. She continues to have worsening effects of Bell’s Palsy in what the doctor calls “a dramatic case”. Not only can she not move half her face, but that half is swollen and painful. We anticipated that we would be able to help her out a little and help her feel better. What we did not expect on that journey down was what I saw just south of Newago. Perched on a tree not far off the road was a bald eagle. Either the eagle never left for winter or it had some information about an early spring that we did not know about. But there it was perched majestically at the top of a tree, strong and proud with a watchful eye. That eagle seemed to be saying to the world, “I am watching over you. I am strong for you and one could almost imagine the strength that could carry the weak on its wings.

Today’s passage from Isaiah speaks so eloquently about the creator God, who rules over everything and provides sustenance to what He has created. It is appropriate and a much needed ending to a horrific week of events around the world. The issue that has surfaced this week is an issue of faith being exploited to reach ends that seem not to be in keeping with the creative hand of the God who started all of what we see and know about the universe and beyond. Some are using religion as the justification of burning and beheading people to get what they want and to make an impact. It is almost as if they are saying, “Look what we can do. It is what God wants, to destroy those who are opposed to the way we think God wants us to be and live.” Although I think the motivations are from a different ideology and quest for power than religion can give.

Most of us were outraged that anyone could think of doing those horrific acts and be able to justify them as something God wanted them to do. So it might be worth our time and effort to take a look at our Creator and compare our view of the God who created us and the view of someone who wants to use God to justify their means to an end.

In the case of the Islamic radical terrorists, their view of God is one that believes that God wants all people to live within a narrow script of behavior, women being subjugated to the whims of men, children being little more than property, being sold into slavery, everyone with the correct language and belief, and the killing of what they believe to be the infidels. Their view of God, if they truly have one is that God is demanding, brutal, demanding submissiveness, intolerant of differences in faith expressions. This God is a God to fear, a God to follow unquestioningly. It is not a God of love, comfort and providing sustenance. It is not a God I want to follow.

When my mother was growing up, she was forced to attend a church that presented God as a demanding God who ruled all that he saw and believed that humans were depraved and beyond redemption unless they were saved by professing to believe in Jesus Christ. She left that church feeling that her very existence was worthless. It was years later that she would hear about a different God, a God who loved us, a God who was capable of sacrificing in order to show us how much we were loved.

So I would like to present who I believe God to be so that we can compare what is being believed by those who would “use” religion to further their own agendas.

Our faith is Christ is based on a single act in history and all that unfolds surrounding that act. This God knows the capacity for humans to distort the truth and yet takes great lengths to call us back from destructive thinking. We, as Christians believe that God sent Jesus, his son, to show us what God was truly like and that most supreme act of self-sacrifice gave the best example of how extensive God’s love for us was. It is in the teachings and acts that Jesus engaged in, that we get the clearest glimpse of God’s nature. We see God as the ultimate creator and guide, not a dictator and not bent on destructive ends. We have to admit that in Old Testament times God’s purposes seemed to be at odds with the creative process. He seemed to want the destruction of entire populations when the wandering Israelites finally emerged out of the wilderness. Those explanations about what happened in the conquering of the land of Canaan seem to us brutal and unforgiving of the people living in the lands to be conquered. But we must remember the world-view of the times. The Israelites believed they were the chosen people and had been promised they would populate the area and have their own territory as a people of God, chosen for God’s purposes. Even back then God was seen as a forgiving God who used deceivers, scoundrels, tricksters, adulterers, and other what we might call “flawed” people to accomplish his purposes.

It is also to be remembered that the way of Jesus was simply not conceivable as people lived in a competitive world filled with ideas of conquest and entitlement. And God’s purposes were accomplished. Finally the time was right for the birth of a savior to end all that competition and “eye for an eye” thinking.

When we look at God’s history, we can begin to see a plan emerge that would lead people away from sin and into a different world-view of God. The time was right for God to act decisively to show the world an extreme love that included forgiveness, grace, and mercy. Even though this God is a God of judgment, that judgment is not the same kind that is in the old Testament. That judgment seeks to show us how much we need God’s grace and forgiveness and moves us out of our self-centeredness into more relational terms with our God and with each other. God does this by moving in with us. He can do that through Jesus Christ whose Spirit dwells within us to guide and lead us through life, learning about ourselves and each other along the way.

Ours is not a retaliatory God, but a God who sees possibilities even in the weakest of us and the most sinful among us. Ours is a transformative God who seeks change within us and seeks to change the world through the ways of Jesus. We are called into a life of love. We are called into a specific way of dealing with the rest of the world as shown by Jesus’ examples. We are not called into an ideology, but are called into a relationship that changes over time as we experience and learn more about God through the Spirit given to us as we come to believe that Jesus is the gift given to transform the world. Our “submissiveness” to God comes as we learn to love God. We want to do what God wants because we love Him.

There is a very clear difference between the God we follow to build up creation, and the God that others follow that calls for destructive and retaliatory acts and blind submissiveness based on rules and regulations, and the belief that God does not love the “infidel”. This is a God who lifts us up on those eagles’ wings to strengthen us into being righter and righter in our relationship with him. He is a God who calls us to love our enemies. He is a God who wants to build up creation, not shut it down or destroy it.

Joe shared with me something he got in an email. A prison guard, attending a “diversification” seminar listened to presentation by people from three different faiths. One of the presenters believed that those who did not believe in his way of thinking about God were to be killed. By killing “infidels” a person could earn their way into heaven. The prison guard’s responsive question to the presenter was this, “Would you rather have your God, who tells you to kill me in order for you to go to heaven or my Jesus who tells me to love you because I am going to heaven and He wants you to be there with me?”

What kind of God do we follow. My very firm belief is we follow a God of love who calls us to love the same way. Our God is a God of strength, compassion, promise, comfort, understanding, and sustenance. This is the God who needs to be proclaimed throughout the earth, a perspective that will transform the world into its right relationship with Him. If we want a statement that sums up who we believe God to be, this might be it: “ God calls us to love what and who God has created.” You see God is not a God to follow because we believe we will make it to heaven. God is a God to follow because we have a relationship with Him who calls us to live the life Jesus showed us and who walks with us every step of the way to continue to guide us.