



November 6, 2016

The God Who Carries Us

READ: Isaiah 46:1 (Common English Bible)

“Bel crouches down; Nebo cowers. Their idols sit on animals, on beasts. The objects you once carried about are now borne as burdens by the weary animals.”

MEDITATE:

One of the most moving – an inspiring – moments in any athletic competition is that one where an athlete stumbles and another competitor goes back to offer help. The tone of the moment is transformed from a test of strength and speed to one of mutual humanity, sharing in one another’s frailties. Such moments remind us of something nobler than defeating another in a game of skill, strength, and speed. Competition may push each of us to realize our best potential – and that is good. But more extraordinary are moments that reveal our common infirmities; moments where we strengthen one another in the storms of life.

This is not so with God; it must not be so. Unfailing strength is the very nature of God. Yet, here Isaiah fashions for us a sharp contrast between gods that are carried and a God that carries us or, as Henry Sloane Coffin once observed, “Between religion as a load and religion as a lift.”¹ In another of Isaiah’s tirades against idols, against imaginary gods, he provides the reader with graphic clarity the gods of Babylon bobbing and swaying in an absurdly undignified fashion on the backs of animals. Weary from the weight of these gods, the animals strain to move forward as the frightened devotees lead the animals to a place of safety away from the invading armies. What a picture; ordinary, mortal human beings struggling to secure the safety of gods! Isaiah intends for this to strike us as absurd.

Isaiah then contrast this ridiculous image with the living God, the God who bore Israel in his arms from its birth and has carried it ever since. The prophet would have us understand that a burdensome religion is a false religion; that a god which must be taken care of is not a faith that can sustain us. Israel needs, as do we, a faith that takes care of us. Communion with the God of Israel is a faith that always shifts the weight of life to God, not the other way around. And Isaiah wants us to know that if we ever feel that we are carrying our religion, that if faith has become burdensome, then our gaze has moved from the one, true living God.

The wonderful teacher of the Christian faith, Paul Tillich, once commented that we are not asked to grasp the faith of the Old and New Testament but, rather, are called to be grasped by it. A Christian’s beliefs are not a set of propositions which we are compelled to accept. That would be a burdensome religion. The Christian faith is an invitation from a living God to come and be held in God’s grasp, to be lifted and carried along through the difficulties of life we must all face. We may struggle at times to free ourselves from God’s embrace, to go through life alone, in our own strength. But sooner or later, we will become as weary as the animals carrying the idols of Bel and Nebo. And when we are depleted, God will be there.

¹Henry Sloane Coffin, “Religion That Lifts,” *Joy in Believing* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1956) 8.

