

## “... and still God’s love prevails”<sup>1</sup>

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Romans 8:28, 35, 37-39

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose ... Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Revelation 21:1-5

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them;

they will be his peoples,

and God himself will be with them;

he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more,

for the first things have passed away.”

And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.”

This month we’ve been asking asking, “Why?” Why do the innocent suffer? Why do prayers go unanswered? Why can’t we see God’s will for our lives? I’m suggesting that the purpose of prayer is to open ourselves to God’s will for our lives rather than to tell God what we want, that God is not behind everything that happens, and that rather than having a specific plan for our lives, God works with us collaboratively to guide our decisions.

Maybe these reflections have resonated with you or maybe this is hard for you. If you have built your faith around certainties, looking at different possibilities could leave you feeling unsettled. Yet asking questions is healthy and helps our faith to grow stronger.

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon is adapted from chapter four of Adam Hamilton’s book, *Why? Making Sense of God’s Will*, 2011.

This morning, we'll consider how God sustains us and gives us hope, how God walks with us and works through us. and how God takes all the suffering and evil of the world and bends it to serve God's purpose. Have you ever experienced the fierce grip of a frightened child clinging to your leg? Have you known what it is to have a youngster curl onto your lap when they're sad or hurt? Or squeeze into bed next to you during a storm? Fear is a basic part of being human. We fear dangers, real and imagined. We fear illness or loss. We can know fear when we look ahead to an uncertain future. Any number of things leave us feeling apprehensive. Our fear can immobilize us.

Our faith can help us put fear in perspective. In faith, we trust that God is with us, nearer than a thought. And God will never leave us. The apostle Paul writes that as we practice trusting God (and not worrying) we can know "the peace of God which surpasses all understanding." Again and again in scripture, we find the message, "Do not be afraid."

You can find some of these verse on the cover of your bulletin.

Believing that God is with us gives us peace in the storms of life and the courage to face what we have to face. Listen to the psalmist's words: "Cast your burdens on the Lord and God will sustain you." Notice, though, that it doesn't say cast your burdens on God and God'll fix things. It says God will sustain you.

Each morning I ask God to help me get out of the way so I can follow God's lead. I also pray for you and for people and situations around the world. I pray for Jared and Tiny and anxieties related to their new business. And for Kellyn and her hopes and fears. I can't physically help my grown children with their challenges but I find a measure of peace as I trust that God is present with them and supports them.

We know that God's usual method of connecting and helping is through people. God does not force us to do anything but when we pay attention to what's happening around us and accept the Spirit's nudges, we notice that we are led in different directions so that we can be part of God's hope for the world ... each of us working to meet the needs around us.

Have you ever noticed a coincidence that did not feel random? I'm thinking of things bigger than when I call my mother and she says, "I was just thinking of calling you!" though this could be one. I'm convinced there are "God-incidents" – moments when we work with God and all things just come together. Like when I just happen to make a pastoral visit minutes after Edith learned that her sister had died. Or when I asked Eldon as we shook hands after worship, "How are you doing" and actually listened closely enough to realize that he needed to talk. Later, as we sat together, he told me about losing his job and his hope that his upcoming eye surgery would open up other possibilities for him. But in the meantime, finances were tight. I listened and suggested a couple resources. We prayed. Because of that first nudge, I was able to walk with him through a difficult patch.

God is mystery. We cannot know most of the ways in which God is working. Still, God invites us to open ourselves to God's leadings. Scripture contains many stories of God working for mercy and justice in the world, through people. Farmers were urged to leave the edges of their fields unharvested so people having a hard time could collect the food. This is how Ruth and Naomi survived when they first returned to Judah. In the Book of Proverbs we read, "Speak out on behalf of the voiceless, and for the rights of all who are vulnerable ... defend the needy and the poor."

God seldom intervenes in miraculous ways to offer mercy or remedy injustice, yet God intercedes by calling people, you and me, to speak up and act. This is how we become the hands, feet and voice of Christ in the world. During Lent we'll be looking at Jesus' stories of the good Samaritan and the shepherd separating the sheep and the goats. Jesus uses both of these stories to teach his disciples to practice true love and discipleship.

God does something more. God takes whatever sorrow or evil we experience, and God redeems it. As we journey through our suffering, God sanctifies (makes holy) it and us. In 1929 the stock market crashed, leading to a global economic collapse. So many lives were destroyed or reshaped. In 2008 similar patterns of greed led to the Great Recession. This was humankind's doing not God's, yet God worked through these situations. Living through sometimes terrible challenges, people grew. Lifestyles changed. For a times, many grew away from affluenza and, they began to notice what gives life true meaning.

When we give our sorrows to God, God leads us to redemption. For many people, the death of loved ones is their greatest sorrow. For others it's something else. My greatest sorrow is having few friends. Gradually, I've become a different person than I would have been without this ongoing grief. I've grown more compassionate. People have told me about the growth they've experienced through their sorrows as well.

None of us want to suffer. We don't want to lose what matters most to us, but having lived through the loss and coming out the other side, we can notice that God sustained us and God use our experience to help us find lives that were meaningful. God is always present, sustaining us and offering comfort. The prophet Isaiah wrote to the Jewish people after the exiles had returned from Babylon. Listen as he assures them of God's promise

to bestow on them a crown of beauty  
instead of ashes,  
the oil of joy  
instead of mourning,  
and a garment of praise  
instead of a spirit of despair.  
They will be called oaks of righteousness,  
a planting of the Lord  
for the display of [God's] splendor.

This is how God works.

Jesus' death is our greatest example of how God works through suffering. Religious leaders felt threatened by Jesus popularity. Governmental leaders thought his message challenged Roman authority. So they had him executed.

God used Jesus' suffering to redeem the world. Through the evil acts of that week, God brought about good and continues to bring good. Through Jesus death, all humanity could witness the depth of God's love. Through suffering, God changes hearts and lives.

Neither suffering nor evil will ever have the last word. This is the message of the resurrection of Christ. Jesus was put to death by people who were focused on themselves and their own agendas. But the cross was not the end of the story. Christianity affirms that Jesus was crucified, dead and buried yet on the third day God raised him from the dead. The resurrection stands as a declaration that good will triumph over evil. Love is stronger than death.

Again and again, in the worst circumstances, scripture announces hope to God's people. We will go through difficulties. We will know pain. But neither will have the last word.

In the final pages of the bible, we find hope-filled words. They were written to Christians who faced sometimes deadly obstacles and who were tempted to compromise their faith. The author encouraged them to persevere. He reminded them that the ultimate triumph belongs to God.

I saw a new heaven and a new earth and I heard a loud voice say, "Look! God's home is here with humankind. God will dwell with us, and God will be with us as our God, wiping away every tear. There will be no more death. No mourning, no crying, no pain ... anymore.

"Hope gives us the courage to confront our circumstances and the capacity to surmount them."<sup>2</sup> Hope is what we find when we look at the story of Jesus life, when we look to the cross and the resurrection. Evil will have its way for a time. We will know losses. We will die. Still God is with us ... all the time.

God works through us to help others and through others to help us. This is our hope. God redeems suffering and compels all that is evil or painful to work for the good. This is our hope. And ultimately the day will come when God's realm will be fulfilled. This is our hope and this hope sustains us.

Amen

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<sup>2</sup> Dr. Jerome Groopman, *The Anatomy of Hope: How People Prevail in the Face of Illness*, 7.