

“The Best Promise I Know”

Romans 8:31-39

March 29, 2020

When we planned the Lenten sermon series, *A Clearing Season*, here at Second, this Sunday’s sermon was titled “Weathering Storms.” It was to be a meditation on the inevitability of setbacks and challenges on our journeys of faith and an encouraging reminder that even those storms can offer a window into our reliance on God’s constant presence. I still believe that those words are true. *And*, I trust that no one worshipping today needs to be given examples of the storms and setbacks that we all face. We are weathering storms together in profound ways on this fifth Sunday in the season of Lent 2020.

This week, though, my heart and mind have been drawn to a different nuance of our theme. As plans have been canceled, schedules trimmed to the bare bones, and the hectic rush of normal life stilled, I’ve begun to accept, and even, occasionally appreciate the emergence of clarity. I’ve realized something about my impatient, action-oriented mind. Until this week, I had only thought of *clear* as a verb. Something we do. A task to accomplish. Clearing the table, clearing the clutter, clearing our schedule. So here’s my confession for you this week, a moment of self-disclosure and personal revelation. In planning six weeks of sermons on this topic, not once did I consider that clear is also an adjective, describing a situation that is easy to understand or interpret, free of obstructions, transparent.

What if this season for clearing is instead a season of clarity? With that thought in mind this week, I turned in Scripture to the words of the Apostle Paul.

I love Paul. I love the boldness of his faith, the beauty of his language, and especially his all-consuming passion for proclaiming the Christian faith in ways that speak to the moment and particular context. Much to my amazement, I have learned over time that not

everyone is captivated by, smitten with, or crazy about the Apostle Paul and his letters. I remember describing my love for Paul’s letters to a group of classmates in seminary. When I finished gushing over the importance and profundity of his words, a classmate looked at our professor and said, “You know what? Chris can have Paul. I’ll stick with Jesus.”

Now, maybe George had a point. But the truth is that all of us who read Scripture inevitably privilege certain texts over others. We all have our favorites. None of us is capable of holding the vast complexity and diversity of the biblical texts on equal ground in our minds. And, what’s more, I don’t think we were ever intended to do so. The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments provide a deep well from which to draw nourishment for the journey of faith. Sometimes, we need to hear Jesus’ words of comfort from the Gospel of John: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.” Other times, we need to be confronted with the words of the prophet Amos, “Let justice roll like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.” And sometimes we need the psalmist’s words of lament, “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?” Scripture provides a rich variety of human words and God’s word to us. Part of the privilege and burden of preaching is struggling with which words disclose God’s word to us in this time and in this place. I’ve found that an especially challenging task in this time of crisis. What language shall we borrow to offer a message now?

Fortunately for this weary preacher, the eighth chapter of Romans is a spiritual gold mine. If I were asked to summarize my own theology or to introduce the faith to a stranger, I would begin here. I also believe that if we were given the opportunity to ask Paul about his deepest convictions, he would recite these words

he wrote to the Christians in Rome. His words find resonance beyond their original context and speak of God's constancy in every age. They offer the best promise I know, the most life-changing truth I have ever encountered, the affirmation that has the capacity to transform the world, absolute clarity about what matters most.

The promise, the truth, the affirmation, the crystal clear message is this: that we belong to God and *nothing* can separate us from God's love in Jesus Christ. If you are seeking words to lean on this morning, these offer a place to start.

Now, let *me* be clear. Paul was no wide-eyed optimist floating ten feet above the reality of events on the ground. His own life told a different story. His extensive list of circumstances and events that might separate us from Christ's love is rooted in real-world experiences. We could surely add to his list. He draws on the language of lament in the Psalms and prophets to give voice to the real cries of suffering people who feel the weight of grief and the danger of death all around them. Having stacked high the afflictions that *might* defeat God's love for us, having left us wondering what hope remains in the face of all that suffering, Paul can finally deliver the punch line. None of that, and nothing else for that matter, can separate us from the persistent promise of God's love. The message is so strikingly clear—the God of the universe grants nothing, not even death, the power to separate us from God's love.

That is the kind of clarity we need right now. It is the Gospel truth of a God whose love endures suffering, a God who is not distant from the cries of human pain and grief, a God who holds this fragile world in the gentle hands of divine grace, a God whose final word is love.

The presence of God is no guarantee that we will avoid pain or be protected from real suffering; nor is faith a surefire defense against the realities of life in the world. Times like these make that excruciatingly obvious, shattering our illusions and exposing our false hopes and flashy idols. But it occurred to me this week

that these difficult days can do something else as well.

In her extraordinary book *Acedia and Me*, Kathleen Norris writes, "the word crisis derives from the Greek for 'a sifting, [...] to jostle, sift, and sort things until only what was most vital would remain.'" Could this crisis, experienced in some way or another by nearly every person on the planet we call home, be a sifting moment? As painful and difficult as it will be, might this unwelcomed time also offer a deepened clarity about what is most vital?

Already we can see the signs of this sifting for substance, this emerging clarity about what matters most. We see acts of extraordinary generosity in the face of tragic suffering—the Italian priest Don Giuseppe Berardelli who offered the ventilator his parishioners bought for him to a young patient. Greater love has no one than this. We hear stories of heroic deeds by medical professionals and first responders who love sacrificially, and stories of grateful communities who express gratitude the only way they can, cheering from balconies and front porches. We experience our own moments of clarity when so much has fallen through the sifting pan of crisis and we take note of what remains—relationships, kindness, faith, hope, and love. Perhaps we find ourselves letting go of grudges and frustrations that now seem so trivial. I told our Lake Fellows in our seminar this week that one unexpected impact in my ministry has been this—I have never been clearer about the purpose of the church. Though absent from one another in body, we are showing others every single day that congregations are not institutions, they are the hands and feet of Christ in the world. Never have I been more grateful for the privilege of ministry.

So, here is a question and a challenge for us all in these weary times. Where do you find clarity emerging from the chaos? How can you give voice and action to what is most vital, what must remain if we are to hold faith together? One author puts it this way...find a "few things that hint of holy whispers tiptoeing in to lead among the wreckage...possibilities that lie on the other side of a world being remade."

My friends in faith, if the world is to be remade,

then let it be remade by Love. Let us trust that the love that holds us will never die, that the God who made us is always with us in suffering, and that there is nothing this world can bring our way that will squeeze its way between us and God.

In 1871, the wealthy Chicago lawyer and Presbyterian elder Horatio Spafford and his wife Anna tragically lost their young son; months later the Great Chicago Fire destroyed their investments. Two years later, Spafford scheduled a trip to Europe by boat, hoping to give his wife and daughters space and time to recover from the tragedy. In a late change of plan, he sent the family ahead while he finished business in Chicago. Days later, Spafford received notice that the ship had collided with an iron sailing vessel and that all four of his daughters, ages 2, 5, 9, and 11, had died in the collision. Only his wife survived, sending Spafford a telegram that began with the words, “Saved alone.” With a heavy heart, Horatio Spafford boarded a boat to join his grieving wife in Paris. On the voyage, Spafford penned words that describe the valley of death’s shadow and the unfailing presence of God. I cannot imagine how these words came to him, but I am so deeply grateful that they did and I pray for a small measure of the courage and faith within them.

*When peace like a river attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,
It is well, it is well with my soul.*

Sometimes, the simplest words offer the greatest clarity. God is with us—God will let nothing separate us. For this reason alone, it is well with my soul. Amen.