

'In the Depths of Life's Trials, God Is With Us' Based on Romans 8:26-39
Delivered on Sunday, July 26, 2020, Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor

Way back in March, when we moved our services online and stopped gathering in the sanctuary, when we saw large parts of our society and economy shut down, and since March, when we have seen how quickly people were being infected by and killed by the virus, I think you probably wondered as I did: Where is God in all of this?

Last week, when the number of loved ones infected topped 4 million, and as we've seen more than 145,000 loved ones lost in the United States, the question might still be prevalent in your mind, as it is mine.

Over these 20 weeks, at times I have spoken to you at times about bringing our frustrations to God. I've tried to lead you in using a form of prayer called 'lament,' where we cry out to God from our brokenness. In our lament, we unload our sadness, our exhaustion and even our anger on God. Indeed, in prayers of lament, we tell God how we think things should be, the things of this life that we feel are not fair, that we cannot handle.

Are there things you think you would do differently if you were God? Certainly, I'd like to think I would change some things, and I think I'd be doing it for the better. From our perspective, it is easy to question God. For me, sometimes when I think or feel this way, a sense of guilt comes over me, as if you and I should not think of God this way, that we should not question God's ways. I think we get this way because we see the way things are ordered in this world, we assume that an all-powerful God must be like an authoritarian King, separated from the people, ready to punish any kind of disloyalty. Rather than pray, we want to hide these feelings from God, as if they will just go away, or we hide them because we fear that God will leave us if for these feelings.

But lament is a time-honored tradition in prayer, in which the faithful wrestle with God's will, because ultimately, when you wrestle with God, you continue your search for God. Sure, we have no justifiable right to question, but God welcomes us anyway because the Lord of Israel is slow to anger, rich in lovingkindness and mercy, longing to be in a relationship with us, rather than apart from us.

Certainly, the ongoing cloud of COVID-19 and continued political unrest in our country are reasons to lament, but I found lament moved to the forefront of my prayers on Monday, when I received word that our beloved elder and friend, Isaac Umoren, had died. This year, Isaac had taken over the Worship Committee on Session. When he and I discussed how to better engage people in worship, the deep reverence he had for God and his unshakable faith, were front and center, as he longed to see this church, reach people in and around this community with God's good news.

The faith that Isaac held is grounded in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection, but Isaac was a much-needed voice in this church for sharing that faith with others. He knew his scriptures and had a bold vision for the future of this church. Indeed, I want to bluntly say to God, I think we still need Isaac. His work was not done here, and it make no sense to take him. But lo, and behold, it seems that I am not God and God has called Isaac to Him. This leaves me speechless as to why this is so, and I struggle for the words.

I'm sure I'm not alone in this and that you too have had times when you have struggled to pray, especially when you don't understand what God's plan is. The Apostle Paul in today's reading, tells us not to be concerned about having the right words. He says the Holy Spirit comes alongside us and helps us in our weakness, when we do not know what to pray for as we ought to, the Spirit pleads for us, and the Spirit groans from within us, in communication too deep for words, pleading for us, according to God's will, when we cannot discern it.

When we lament the broken world all around us and its injustice, or when we mourn the end of a relationship, or when we mourn division in the world today, or grieve the loss of a loved one, like Isaac, it can be hard to think about 'good news,' difficult to find our hope and peace, tough to find God in all this.

In the depths of life's trials, all this talk about 'good news' in the church can be confusing. It was confusing too for the Roman churches that Paul wrote these words to nearly 2,000 years ago. They were divided as Jewish and Gentile believers in Christ who argued, mistreated each other, judged the ways in which the other lived their faith, and it threatened to upend the network of churches God had called. Already, it seems that in the heart of the empire, the *euangelion* or 'good news' of the church, a term Rome also used for official proclamations, may have rung hollow to them already, just like the euangelion or good news of the emperor rang hollow.

But throughout this letter, Paul reminds them of what the 'good news' actually is. I believe it is in this passage we read today that Paul does it most clearly. The good news or gospel isn't that a Christian's life will become easy because they have enough faith. The good news or gospel is not that we get a ticket to heaven when we die, just for believing. The good news or gospel is not that we have the best philosophy of any group out there. No, the good news or gospel is that in all our trials & tribulations, the One True God of Israel is with you and me always, and the True God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – knows each of us by name, calls us and loves us. The One True God knows you by name and loves you.

Paul tells the network of home churches in Rome that whatever is going on around them, these things together for those who love God, yes, those called for God's purpose. You are called to be a part of this service. No matter what reason you are reading today, you are called by God for a purpose to read this. You see, God knows you and has always known you from before you existed, and God is not calling you to be formed according to the ways of this world, the ways of power, popularity, and wealth, all the false idols that get in the way.

No God is calling you to be shaped according to the model we have in Jesus, whose rule is marked with humility, patience, gentleness and love. The one in whom the fullness of God dwelled, died on the cross for us, and rose again for our salvation, to share God's life with us.

Paul says that you are chosen and called to be shaped in the image of the Son, Jesus Christ, so that you will share in His resurrection, and by this, be made a child of God. Yes, God has marked you out in advance and has justified you by Christ's cross, meaning that in your calling you are made right with God and glorified. In the face of the trials of this world, of this nation, of our communities and of our families, the good news is far greater than a promise of prosperity or healing, and it is far greater than a view of God as an angry tyrant you've appeased so you can go

to heaven, and it is far greater than a set of moral teachings for a right society. The Good News is the truth and reality that you & I are not called to strive to be God, but God has come down to be one of us to be with you, to empower you by God's very Spirit within you, to seek God's will and live according to that will, reconciling all things to God in Christ.

This is truly good news because if God is *for* you and I, who can even be against us? In Jesus, God gave everything for you, when God had no need to give anything to you. And so, God gives all things freely to us – God gave God's own self to be with us. In the image of Christ, what charge of this world can be brought against us? So what if the world makes you an outcast, God has called you. So what if the world says you are weak or don't have the power this world wants you to show, God is your strength and your power. So what if by the world's standards you are not wealthy and extravagant and outwardly perfect, you are filled with God's Spirit and love. There is no condemnation in Christ Jesus.

Jesus is at God's right hand – that means Jesus is One with God, the Word of God and in the Power of God – and He is praying for you & me. And the world's suffering, or hardship, or persecution, or famine, or danger, or sword, might make us look like mere sheep for the slaughter, but there is glory in that, because we are completely victorious – conquerors – over sin and death, not by our own work, but through the Messiah who loves us, who died and was raised for us. The one who remains with us right now, by the Holy Spirit.

I am not here to say that I can give you the air-tight explanation of why God allows suffering. There are many who have given great reasons why they believe God's world is as it is, but if you are resistant to God's love and resistant to God's call on your life, you will find a reason to reject every single one of those explanations.

But if you are open, and have an open mind, ready to see where God might be leading you, I want to assure you that in the depths of our sorrow, you and I must be willing to share our pain with God, as there is no reason to hold it back. You can share our lamentations, even if your words are imperfect, because it is through every single prayer we breathe, that God's own Spirit works in us, to say what we have no words to say.

In your questioning, in your doubt, in your struggles with uncertainty, there is no profit in turning your back on the One who knows you and has called you. I want you to embrace the love and grace shown by the One True God who made you, and is the God who chose to share in your humanity and die for you, because it is rising again to new life that Jesus shows us and offers us this new life by His Holy Spirit.

Where is God we ask? God is with us. That is the good news. The ways of this world bring pain and suffering, but we do not conquer by the ways of this world. Indeed, our victory, is not in having power over others. Our victory is in this – the presence of God with us, in us and through us by the church under Christ. You are made a temple of God's Spirit, to be the place where that Spirit dwells. For as Paul said, I am convinced, that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor the present nor the future, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God, found in Jesus, our King and our Lord. Amen.

Word Search Puzzle

from WhenWeWordSearch.com (use for free distribution only)
words in a straight line left to right or top to bottom



Words in the puzzle are printed in *bold italics*

(Romans 8:26-39 NTE) In the same way, too, the Spirit comes *alongside* and helps us in our weakness. We don't know what to *pray* for as we ought to; but that same *Spirit* pleads on our behalf, with groanings too *deep* for words. And the *Searcher* of Hearts knows what the Spirit is *thinking*, because the Spirit pleads for God's *people* according to God's will. We know, in fact, that *God* works all things together for *good* to those who love him, who are called according to his *purpose*. Those he foreknew, you see, he also marked out in *advance* to be shaped according to the *model* of the *image* of his Son, so that he might be the *firstborn* of a large *family*. And those he *marked* out in advance, he also *called*; those he called, he also justified; those he *justified*, he also glorified. What then shall we say to all this? If God is for us, who is against us? God, after all, did not *spare* his own Son; he gave him up for us all! How then will he not, with him, freely *give* all things to us? Who will *bring* a charge against God's chosen ones? It is God who declares them in the right. Who is going to condemn? It is the *Messiah*, Jesus, who has died, or rather has been raised, who is at God's right hand, and who also prays on our behalf! Who shall *separate* us from the Messiah's love? *Suffering*, or *hardship*, or persecution, or famine, or *nakedness*, or *danger*, or *sword*? As the *Bible* says, "Because of you we are being killed all day *long*; we are *regarded* as sheep destined for slaughter." No: in all these things we are completely *victorious* through the one who loved us. I am persuaded, you see, that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor the present, nor the future, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the *love* of God in King *Jesus* our Lord.