

THE WORD FROM GILEAD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
July 26, 2020; 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

SCRIPTURE READING

Psalms 105:1-11

O give thanks to the LORD! Praise God's name,
make known God's deeds among the peoples.

² Sing to God, sing praise,
and tell of all God's wonderful works.

³ Glory in God's holy name;
let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice.

⁴ Seek the LORD, seek the LORD's strength;
seek the presence of the LORD continually.

⁵ Remember the marvels God has done,
the wonders performed and the judgments pronounced.

⁶ O descendants of Sarah and Abraham, God's faithful ones,
you children of Rachel and Jacob, God's chosen ones.

⁷ Yahweh is the LORD our God;
whose authority covers all the earth.

⁸ God remembers the covenant forever,
the promise God made for a thousand generations,

⁹ the covenant made with Abraham and Sarah,
the oath to Isaac and Rebekah,

¹⁰ confirmed to Leah, Rachel and Jacob,
an everlasting covenant with Israel,

¹¹ saying, "To you I will give the land of Canaan
as your portion for an inheritance."

SCRIPTURE READING

Romans 8:26-39

[The Holy] ²⁶...Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. ²⁷ And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

²⁸ We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God's purpose. ²⁹ For those whom God foreknew God also predestined to share the image of the Only Begotten, in order that Christ might be the firstborn within a large family. ³⁰ And those whom God predestined God also called; and those whom God called have also been justified; and those whom God justified have, in turn, been glorified.

³¹ What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? ³² Since God did not spare the Only Begotten, but gave Christ up for all of us, we may be certain, after such a gift, that God will freely give us everything. ³³ Who will bring any charge against God's chosen? Since God is the one who justifies, ³⁴ who has the power to condemn? Only Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, and who now intercedes for us. ³⁵ Who will separate us from the love of Christ?

Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

³⁶ As it is written,

"For your sake we are being killed all day long;
we are looked upon as sheep to be slaughtered."

³⁷ Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors because of God who has loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ 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.

SERMON

"Rhymes and Reasons"

Rev. Martin McGeachy

This has got to be my favorite passage in the Bible. Or do I say that every other week? "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." It's so inspiring! So comforting. So hopeful. In a world filled with insurmountable obstacles, *HOPE*. And "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God's purpose." Why do these words soothe our sin-sick souls like a balm in Gilead? Precisely because in this world, in this reality, in your life and mine, it sure doesn't look like that. We often feel separated from God, and we fear that our sins or the slings and arrows of circumstance will slice between our faith and our reality. And do all things really work together for good for us, we who feel called according to God's purpose? I once knew an employer who worked around children all the time, and he was a hurtful, angry man who was constantly mean, had no business working with youth, or adults either, for that matter, who emotionally abused his employees and screamed at them in front of the kids, and this man got promoted and placated by the bosses upstairs because his business made money. I remember telling someone who had been badly hurt by this man that one day he would get his – karma would get him. That was thirty years ago, and he's still going strong, with all the niceties of life surrounding him. Karma sure takes its time, doesn't it?

But that was in the secular world. Maybe this is about within the faith community. Nope. Look at the faithful children abused by pedophile priests and ministers, many of whom escaped earthly judgement. And let's put heavenly judgement aside for the moment, because even judgement before the throne of God, while it may be justice, doesn't cast abuse of children into the Light of what's right, and the Scripture says that ALL things work together for good for those who love God. What does this mean? It certainly doesn't mean that only good things will happen to God's faithful. Hardly. It rains on the just and unjust. Remember, these are supposed to be encouraging words to a people who know suffering. Look at the words Paul writes to the Romans right before this: Verse 18: "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us." And 22: "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; 23 and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption."

Perhaps what Paul means when he says that all things work together for good is that despite the appearance of evil, in God's plan, it is actually Good. Well, yes, that does often happen. We go through a hard time, and it strengthens us for the tasks ahead. You know the story of the man who was taking a walk and saw a butterfly struggling to emerge from a cocoon, and taking pity on the creature, helped the butterfly to escape. But the butterfly, not having gone through nature's process, was too weak to fly, and died. We don't see as God sees; God has a bigger picture, and knows what we need, while we concentrate mostly on what we want. There's a poem you've probably seen on the Internet, or one of those wooden placards you buy at Pier 1 and hang in your kitchen, that goes:

I asked for strength. God gave me difficulties to make me strong.
I asked for wisdom. God gave me problems to solve.
I asked for prosperity. God gave me brawn and brain to work.
I asked for courage. God gave me dangers to overcome.
I asked for patience. God placed me in situations where I was forced to wait.
I asked for peace. God gave me troubled people to help.
I asked for favors. God gave me opportunities.
I received nothing I wanted.
I received everything I needed.

(There are a number of versions of this poem on the Internet, attributed to a number of sources, frequently Swami Vivekananda, the well-known 19th century Indian Hindu monk, and although I can't prove he wrote it, his name "Vivekananda" does mean "the bliss of discerning wisdom" in Sanskrit, so it seems appropriate: "Sanskrit [viveka](#) and [ānanda](#).^[87]; Cited in Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swami_Vivekananda)

We can all think of times when we were angry about some circumstance in our lives, and only later could we look back and see it as a pivotal moment of our development. In the Old Testament, Joseph is sold into slavery by his brothers, but God raises him up, and years later, he says to his penitent brothers, "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, and God is doing that today." (Gen 50:20) I can tell you stories of couples who met during the war, and lived happily as husband and wife for many years. They would not have met if not for the war. But does that make the war a Good thing? I'll guarantee you right now out there is a guy who had COVID and was in ICU for a month who fell in love with a handsome nurse who tended him, and the local news will film a feature on them when they get married in 2021. But that doesn't mean it was good that there are 645 thousand people who have died so far this year worldwide.

I get impatient with the too-simple theology that every action that takes place on this earth is part of God's pre-ordained plan, and therefore it's all good. Oh, there are times when I feel it, and I can, Zen-like, say, "Ohm; it's all good." But then circumstances happen that can only be called evil, and even if God did create a world which allows for evil and random tragedy, I refuse to lay the blame for our sins at God's feet. My former mother-in-law's parents died in a horrific car crash when she was thirteen. Her Presbyterian church family told her it was God's plan, and she gave up on God then and there, and never came back. The news recently has been full of videos of young Black men and women being killed. We all saw the police kneeling on George

Floyd's neck while he couldn't breathe, and many of us have been stirred to renewed action to address racism in our systems; and therefore good will come. But I can't believe that God orchestrated that to teach us all a lesson. We let the perpetrators off the hook when we say that, and indeed ourselves and our own culpability in systems of privilege and bias. We don't do the grieving any favors by blaming God for their pain.

BUT God can and will USE it for good, no matter how heinous. There's actually some controversy over the common translation of that phrase, "all things work together for good for those who love God." We read this morning from the NEW Revised Standard Version, but the OLD Revised Standard Version, looking at variances in different ancient manuscripts of this text, came up with the translation, "We know that IN everything God works for good WITH those who love him." Gerald R. Cragg, commenting on that translation, says:

There is nothing in the constitution of the universe to encourage the easy optimism that everything will automatically work out to the satisfaction of good people. What Paul affirms is that God co-operates in all things for good with those who love [God]. This leads to the discovery that even 'the sufferings of this present time' become a source of blessing. There is no sentimental attempt to persuade ourselves that evil things are actually good. They remain what they are; but though bad in themselves, they have lost the power to defeat us. No matter how bitter circumstances may be, we can learn to discover in them God's co-operation. (Gerald R. Cragg, "Romans," The Interpreter's Bible, Vol. IX, New York/Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1954, p. 524)

Working together with God. All things work together for Good. It doesn't just happen. We work for it, and God works for it on our behalf. Sen. Cory Booker credits the inspiration of the life and struggle of Rep. John Lewis as a direct line to Booker becoming only the 4th popularly elected African American to the Senate, saying that Lewis "showed all of America that the most powerful force on the planet will always be unarmed truth and indefatigable love." That was "the power that John Lewis unleashed his entire life, ripples of love and hope and change." Grace and forgiveness were his great virtues, and in his ability and willingness to forgive, "John taught us what hope really is. Hope is calloused; hope is bloodied, battered; hope is a muscle that you have to flex every single day... Forgiveness is not something that comes without confronting the ugliness, and confronting the wrongs, which he never shied from doing, but he always offered people a path to redemption, which was his ability to recognize the dignity and the divinity in all people; to never demean the person. Fight the injustice, but always leave the person open a pathway to redemption and forgiveness."

(Sen. Cory Booker, "The Today Show," NBC-TV, 7/20/20)

So much good came from the life of Lewis, but it was because he took on and addressed what was not good in the world. He worked in tandem with God, using faith as a catalyst for change. That reminded me of the John Denver song, "Rhymes and Reasons." Denver sings:

*So you speak to me of sadness, and the coming of the winter
Fear that is within you now, it seems to never end...*

And you wonder where we're going; where's the rhyme and where's the reason...
The song goes on to sing of grace and blessing as the rhyme and reason, and closes with this invitation—

*And the song that I am singing is a prayer to non-believers
Come and stand beside us; we can find a better way.*

(“Rhymes and Reasons” by John Denver)

Sometimes I feel like what I say from the pulpit every week is encouragement for those struggling to stay faithful (as we all are from day to day), but my evangelistic mission is that very invitation—“a prayer to non-believers. Come and stand beside us; we can find a better way.”

Maybe if we work together with God and with each other to find a better way, then when we’re called to exit this life, we can leave it in slightly better shape than when we found it. I have a placard of my own that greets me in the hallway when I walk down the stairs every morning. It’s not from Pier 1; my daughter Rachel painted it, and it proclaims, “All Is Well.” Those are the words my father repeated to all of his children over the last days of his life. As he was slipping away, and he knew he was dying, it was very important to him to preach that as his final sermon, in the shadow of death: “All Is Well.” How do we know that? Because God holds us and the world in the Divine, Almighty Hand, and all things in God work together for good.

So today, while we still have life left, if not all seems well, it’s because we still have work to do. But we don’t have to do it alone. God will work with us. Come, join us. We can find a better way.

Amen.