

Third Sunday in Lent Worship March 15, 2020

Song

“You Are Mine” – performed by Erin Pacheco

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Scripture & Sermon

Text: Romans 5: 1-11

Title: Swirling Cauldron II

Date: 03.15.20

Roger Allen Nelson

The last couple days, the last couple weeks, have felt like a swirling cauldron of uncertainty and anxiety topped off with a measure of Lenten attention to sin, death, and the human condition. Our frailty is on full display. Not just a few of you have said that the uncertainty feels like the days after 9/11. But we were able to be gather together after 9/11. This is uncertainty compounded by social distancing. This is uncertainty plus loneliness. There is something unsettling about standing at a pulpit in an empty sanctuary....

And, I'm mindful that, even in this, the ability to cancel is a privilege. Hope folks are serving breakfast at Roseland Christian Ministries this morning because our friends in that community rely on that ministry for food and shelter. May God bless and encourage and protect our brothers and sisters and all of those who face these days with compromised and restricted resources.

But, to borrow language from a sermon from a few weeks ago. To quote myself...

In creation there's a force at work –

a force greater than the sum of our missteps stacked end to end,

a force that is beyond our power to turn around,

a force that breaks and buries the beauty of every soul,

a force that finds expression in every corner of creation,

a force that is as immediate as the day's headlines,

and is indelibly etched in our memories,

a force that spoils *shalom*,

a force that finally leads to death.

That force is sin....

And this morning, we pick up Paul announcing God's response to sin.

Biblical scholars believe that Paul dictated most of his letters to some manner of secretary. And, there are occasions where you can almost hear his voice. The words tumble out....

You see, at the just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die....

It's like he caught himself. "Wait. People die for another. Dying for others, dying for country, is part of what soldiers do. Putting themselves in harm's way is the very definition of what soldiers or police or firefighters do. And most parents would offer themselves up for their children." You can almost hear Paul's wheels turning. But...

But, then there's a big but.

But God demonstrated his own love for us in this: while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.

Paul doesn't say that Christ died for friends and family.
Paul doesn't say that Christ died out of a sense of duty.
Paul doesn't say that Christ died for loved ones.
Paul says that Christ died for the ungodly,
 while we were his enemies,
 while we were still (or yet) sinners,
 while we were drowning in a swirling cauldron.

Some of you may remember this story....

When our son was an infant we lived in a one-bedroom apartment with broad planked hardwood floors, interesting architectural detail, and thick wavy glass in old wooden window frames. The space was cramped and Zach's crib was wedged into a corner just outside of our bedroom door.

One night I woke to Zach crying. It wasn't a normal cry; it was a frightened wail. He sounded panicked and confused. As I got out of bed to get him, I stepped into the hallway, pulled the string to the light above the crib, looked down, and Zach looked up tear-stained, scared, and helpless. He'd had a diaper explosion.

 From head to toe there was baby mess.

 From one end of the crib to the other there was baby mess.

 From stem to stern, tip to tail, there was baby mess.

 His whole-little-white-world of baby blankets and crib bumpers was covered with his mess. He was frightened, confused, and powerless to do anything about his condition.

Now....

I didn't say, "Zachary, first say you're sorry and then I can clean you up."

I didn't say, "Zach, get yourself cleaned up a little and then I can pick you up."

I didn't say, "Zach, stop your wailing and ask for help properly."

I didn't say, "Zach, wait a minute while I get your mother."

 But, while he was still a mess,

 while he was still confused,

 while he was still covered,

 while he was still crying,

while he still powerless,

I reached into the crib, pulled him to my chest and held him close (skin to skin) to love and take the fear away – and I got his mess all over me. Without hesitation, without anger, without regard for my own cleanliness, without waiting for his trust, obedience, belief, or repentance.

You get the point. To use John Calvin's language:

God first loved us without being first provoked thereto by our love.

Or, to use the language of the last few weeks:

While we were still stuck in a swirling cauldron of sin and death God waded in in Christ and took our mess – even unto death – upon himself. The initiative, the action, the agency, the love was wholly outside of us, wholly God's doing. Thanks be to God.

In the grand tradition of youth pastors telling stories that involve bodily functions, I told that story at a retreat for a couple hundred high school kids. I was the colorful comedic speaker – except Zach was in 8th grade and he was sitting in the backrow. He was embarrassed and angry; and in the eyes of the kid that mattered the most to me I went from trust to traitor.

He was humiliated and felt betrayed. I tried to tell him that the reason the story works is that it happens to everyone. He responded, "But, not everyone talks about it." And in my apology was the promise not to use him in any talk or sermon without his permission – even this morning.

But, maybe we should talk about it....

Maybe we should talk about our sin. Part of Lent is making time to talk about our mess, our stink, our culpability and complicity in brokenness. Part of Lent is sitting with our frailty and fear even as we navigate life with the Coronavirus. Can we use this forced slower pace for reflection on the transient and temporary nature of our security? When we're stripped of all busyness, banality, and the illusion of control can we find there a hope or a power that reaches beyond our worst instincts and darkest impulses?

Dear friends, our text, and quite frankly the Christian gospel, swings on the mystery of God in Christ on the cross.

While we were yet ungodly,
while we were God's enemies,
while we were dead....

God's love finds expression in crucifixion.

And that only means something if there is such a grievous guilt at the heart of humanity that it can only be healed/forgiven by the death of God. If the cross doesn't ultimately salvage creation's *shalom*, then it is nothing more than a gross cosmic joke....

Therefore, without wrestling with the variety and nuances of atonement theories, let us rest in the scandal of the gospel – that in the crucifixion there is life. And every sin, every horror, every

holocaust, every betrayal, and every brokenness find in the cross judgment, redemption, healing, and forgiveness.

Karl Barth writes about it this way:

Neither the personality of Jesus, nor the “Christ idea,” nor the Sermon on the Mount, nor his miracles or healings, nor his trust in God, nor his love for his brethren, nor his demand for repentance, nor his call to poverty and discipleship; neither the implications of his gospel for social life or for the life of the individual – none of these things exist in their own right. Everything shines in the light of his death, and is illuminated by it.

I don't know when we'll gather again for worship. We'll follow the lead of Hope's doctors and Hope's council and the direction and recommendations of the state and the CDC. I do know that I miss seeing you and being together. Faith finds expression in our life together and not in podcasts....

But, until we are able to be joined in worship I'm reminded that in his last few days Jesus broke bread and shared the cup with his betrayer, his friends fell asleep when he asked for their company, and they subsequently ran, hid, abandoned and denied him. But none of that deterred his journey to the cross.

For, the self-giving love of God in Christ is not contingent on us. We are simply the recipients of the mystery that God effects the salvation of the ungodly through his death on the cross.

You are loved and accepted by God in Christ – even now, even in our powerlessness...

Thanks be to God.
Amen.

Song

“In Christ Alone” – performed by Erin Pacheco

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Prayer

Doxology

“Praise God, from Whom All Blessings Flow” – performed by Erin Pacheco

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Benediction