

4.25.21 Er4 God's Care Even Before Christ's Ministry

- We received another one of THOSE pieces of mail the other week
 - By one of THOSE pieces of mail, I mean the kind of strange, mean, or scurrilous letters that people send out to hundreds of churches to enlist us in some kind of misguided crusade
 - This letter was from halfway across the state of Pennsylvania, and it called us to join in a prayer ministry that someone felt God had called this person to lead
 - Specifically this letter claimed that the riots in our cities, and the Coronavirus pandemic were messages from God to punish our country and bring it to its knees
 - The riots were a message from God? From the tone of the letter I doubt that this person would recognize that there were also protests in our cities – protests about what the ongoing tragedy of racism in our country has done to all of its people.
 - All the letterwriter could see was riots that were God's punishment, rather than seeing the even greater peaceful protests that sought to change and begin to heal our country
 - Of course riots are bad – but racism is a scandal, and in fact almost 30 years ago a prominent American, evangelical leader wrote a book that named racism as America's original sin [Jim Wallace] – but this letter ignored that
 - And what about the pandemic? Is this the way that God acts to punish us and the world?
 - Some people seem to think that when something bad happens, it is God's punishment
 - And unfortunately too many Christians are taking other extreme views, like "If God wants me to die, I will die, and if God wants me to live, I will live – so I will not wear a mask, or take any precautions

- But all this ignores the fact that God can work through science, and that God has given us common sense
- For over a year now, we as people of faith have had to live through this pandemic.
 - Some of our members, some of our family or friends have died. More of us have become sick. Many of us have endured lockdowns. And so many have either had to work in ways that exposes us to other people and the possibility of infection, or we have worked from home... and some of simply lost jobs.
 - But as people of faith, we also look to the deep wells of Christianity's centuries-old Gospel-centered preaching, teaching and wisdom to give us comfort, hope, and guidance in this pandemic time
 - In worship, every week we pray for those who are sick, and hardly a week goes by that I don't in some way connect the Sunday sermon in some way to the pandemic, because the spread of the coronavirus is like the elephant in the room – it's just too big to ignore, and the pandemic is so persistent that we need to hear faithful assurance with equal persistence week after week
 - Usually, in preaching and teaching I have pointed to the gift of Jesus Christ who brought forgiveness through the cross and hope through the resurrection – and this has been so absolutely important, and by all means, this Easter message stands in defiant opposition to the idea that with the virus God decided to punish us, as if forgiveness in the cross was not enough for us or the world
- But today, I want to point back not only to Jesus, but to God's promises **EVEN BEFORE JESUS!**
 - We need to remember that even before Jesus, God was "gracious and merciful, full of compassion, and abounding in steadfast love."
 - Today we read and heard the 23rd Psalm, which has to be the best known, and most beloved psalm in the Bible
 - In fact, it is not only one of the best know psalms, it is one of the best known passages of scripture of any kind... and it is our psalm for today

- It begins, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want”– however not many of us have ever shepherded sheep
- The image of a shepherd is a bit foreign to us, but many of us have cared for pets, we have cared for people in need, and in some way we have all cared for children, or nieces and nephews, or trouble friends, or aging parents, or sick spouses.
- You may have never carried a shepherd’s staff or tended a flock, but in some kind of experience each one of us knows what it is like to care for someone... and hopefully, each one of us knows what it is like for someone to care for us
- And now, the 23rd Psalm – it declares the absolute assurance that the God who created the world, the God who rescued Israel from slavery, the God who later sent Jesus – Psalm 23 declares the absolute assurance that this same Lord loves and cares for each one of us.
- “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil, and my cup is running over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”
- Forget those toxic letters filled with God’s wrath, and let us defy those who would ignore the 23rd Psalm and the Good News of Easter.
- Know that God loves you.
- And God loves not only you, but God loves the rest of the creation too
- Meanwhile, the God of love, calls us to resist the pandemic, care for the sick, feed the hungry, fight racism, care for creation, love the large cities and the small villages, and pursue the justice and peace that God intended for us... and in the end, God promises forgiveness, justice and peace for all creation.