

All Things Work Together for Good

Scriptures: **Psalm 105:1-6**
 Romans 8:26-39

A naive young American college student stops in North Korea on his way to a semester of study abroad in China, pulls down a propaganda poster from his hotel wall and stuffs it in his suitcase as a souvenir. Then he gets arrested for espionage at the Pyongyang airport as he's about to leave the country, and ends up being convicted in a show trial to 15 years of hard labor in a North Korean prison camp. Then he supposedly contracts botulism while in custody, and three years later is sent home a zombie, showing signs of physical abuse at the hands of his captors, only to die a few days later when his parents decide to remove his life support devices. Rather than taking responsibility for its brutish actions, North Korea threatens to fire a nuclear tipped-ballistic missile at the United States or its allies, and subsequently test fires versions of it that could potentially reach the West Coast and even Chicago. The world seems teetering on the brink of disaster, with any number of other situations around the globe threatening to mushroom into major international conflicts, not to mention the on-going constant threat of terrorism ... and on and on it goes. The news is downright scary this summer, if we're paying attention to it.

What's an even greater mystery in the light of this human tragedy and the chaotic political situation our country has bumbled into recently is the assertion in this morning's New Testament lesson that *"all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to God's purpose."* Really? How could that be? ...

How can we, people who claim to believe in a loving, caring, benevolent God, go on believing this in the face of personal tragedies like the one that befell Otto Warmbier or the looming potential of nuclear confrontation that seems ever more likely? It defies understanding. It doesn't compute. It just doesn't make sense.

When I saw that this week's lectionary included our lesson from Romans 8, I thought *"Nope, I'm not going to use that one! It's too heavy for a light summer sermon."* In light of all that's happening right now in the world, what could I do with it? *"Nope. I'll have to look for something else to preach on."*

But Romans 8:26-39 is a crucial text to the Christian faith, a foundation of our whole belief system. So to have ignored it in the interest of dishing up some light summer fare would have been irresponsible. In light of the conflicts and tragedies we're facing, we need perhaps more than ever to grapple with the assertion made by the Apostle Paul that in all things God knows more than we do and is intentionally working through the events of life to bring us to salvation and wholeness in Jesus Christ.

Let's look at the text. To understand it's meaning we need to set it in it's wider context. Paul is writing to the early church in Rome, which was going through a time of persecution when early Christians were being put to death for their faith. They were

struggling for their very survival in the face of the overwhelming power of Rome. The only thing that would get them through these difficult circumstances would be the very faith that had gotten them into trouble with the authorities in the first place. They must have hope in the future, and believe ultimately in God's offer of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.

"I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us," writes Paul. He was very confident that the time was short, that the Second Coming of Christ was imminent, and that the difficult days Christians were experiencing at the moment were only an intense prelude to the glory about to be revealed to those who endured and were faithful to Jesus Christ. Paul believed there were unseen powers at work in the universe, powers that would work in ways we couldn't foresee to change the circumstances the world was going through, and change them in a way only God could see or know. That power of God at work in the world is what Paul refers to in our passage as the Spirit, which he said intercedes on humans' behalf at the direction of God the Creator, overcoming humans' shortcomings and weaknesses so that they might make it through the trials and tribulations of the current age. Without the help of the Spirit, this cosmic, unseen force, no one would be able to make it through the calamities that were occurring and that were about to occur. But God knew this already, and so out of a deep love for humanity and a desire for all people to be saved, has chosen to stack the deck in our favor, prearranging how things will turn out.

Well, what do you think about that? It sounds decidedly Presbyterian to me! Predestination... a doctrine close to the center of Reformed Protestant Christian theology, and a keynote of Calvinist theological heritage, almost as though the Apostle Paul were a dyed in the wool Scots Presbyterian Calvinist! But is this comforting or disturbing to us?

We often think of predestination as something on which hellfire and brimstone preachers of old dwelt. The emphasis back then was on who was predestined to be part of God's chosen "elect," and who was not. And in all of it, it was understood that God had already chosen those who would be saved, and there was nothing anyone could do to change it. Life was just a matter of finding out what God's plan was and accepting it. Not a very comforting thought, particularly if it was questionable whether you were one of the ones who was in or was out!

But we can look at it in a different way as well. *"The history and personal make-up of the Church are not due to chance or to arbitrary human choices,"* writes Biblical scholar C.K. Barrett in his commentary on Romans, *"but represent the working out of God's plan... Predestination is the most comfortable of all Christian doctrines, if (people) will accept it in its biblical form, and not try to pry into it with questions which it does not set out to answer. It is not a 'quantitative limitation of God's action, but its qualitative definition,' the final statement of the truth that justification, and in the end, salvation also, are by grace, and through faith alone."*

This is to look at life and to say that it's not up to us. It doesn't depend on what

we make happen or not. God is in control, and we are just a part, a tiny piece, if you will, of the eternal plan that God has set in motion from the beginning of time.

This is comforting if you trust that God, the author of the plan, is benevolent and a loving God who has our best interests at heart. Otherwise, we could be in big trouble. A capricious, despotic God who was ultimately in control would be very bad news for humanity. Or, what if there was no God at all? What if life was random, both the things we characterize as good and bad? What if none of it, when added together made any sense or had any purpose at all? This is the doctrine of nihilism, a thought form which has many adherents in this cynical, post-modern era in which we're living, and there are a particularly high number of nihilists among well-educated younger adults. They experience the events that make up our news, particularly this summer, and come to the conclusion that there is no meaning or purpose to life, that nobody is in control, and that if there is a God, indeed, then God doesn't care and is uninvolved in the human arena.

Paul laid it out as a basic building block of the Christian faith that God is good and trustworthy and will fulfill the promise of salvation made to human beings in the Resurrection of Christ from the dead. There is no power in the universe or in the whole scope of time, says Paul, that can separate us from the love of God as expressed for us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, our Lord. This is radically good news. The verdict is already in. We find that God has been in control all along, even when it didn't look like it to us, and our salvation is assured. It doesn't depend on us. It's not dictated by what we do or don't do. The outcome has been set since the beginning of time.

Of course we have to do one thing: *believe* this. That's it. *Believe* the promise of God, that God indeed loves us and wills eternal life and health for us. In the face of tragedies like the untimely death of Otto Warmbier and other calamities we may go through in our personal as well as public lives, this is the challenge of Christianity: to believe, and not to fear.

The choice is ours: to be afraid, or to have hope. With all the awful things going on in the world, the first choice is so much easier. We have lots of reasons to live our lives consumed by fear. It's a fearful world we live in. Just switch on the evening news or check out the newsfeed headlines on your I-Phone and you'll have Heinz 57 varieties of things to be afraid of. Actually, this is what sells the news, and you can be sure the networks will be full of it. They'll have you so worked up by the time they get to the weather that you won't even dare go outside, and if you did, you'd probably get blown away by the F2 tornado that Doppler Radar shows on Weather.Com could possibly be headed right your way!

The choice to have faith and to hope is harder. We have plenty of reasons to think hoping is just wishful thinking, that we've been let down or betrayed by the way events have turned out in our lives many times already. Why hope or have faith, when there's so little tangible evidence that it pays off in the end?

Actually there is some evidence that it does pay off. Medical research over the past couple of years seems to be confirming what has long been suspected: that religious people, people of faith, people who take a positive approach to living, live longer and are healthier than those who don't.

But past the tangible, there is the intangible dimension to life. I believe that life is much more than what we see of it, that underlying all of creation is a deep source of order, harmony, intention, and yes, love. And I believe that people over the centuries have not been on the wrong track to have sensed the presence of this good and loving Spirit, whose presence is infused throughout all of life, even in the events we experience as tragedy.

When it comes right down to it, which way would you rather live: consumed by fear and paranoid? Or free from fear, and faithful? By being faithful, our energy is freed up from having to be focused on the negative factors in life. We can be oriented toward receiving the good, and open and ready to move forward with it when it comes. God will take care of the rest. And even the bad stuff, the tragedy, when viewed through the perspective of faith, works together with the rest of our experiences to teach us more about the mystery of life and growth. Tragedies can be transformed and given meaning by the power of faith. It's all in how we approach them.

“We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose...” writes Paul. *“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, 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.”*

Yes, this is the way of faith, the best way to live in a confusing and troubling world. We who call ourselves Christ's followers believe there is indeed a God, a God who knows us, who loves us, and who'll stop at nothing to bring us through to the coming new day, a day when the love of God will be realized for all those who are called according to God's purpose.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.