

## “I Will Not Leave You Orphaned”

Psalm 66:8-20; 1 Peter 3:13-22; John 14:15-21

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Yesterday morning I woke to the peaceful sounds of birds chirping in the trees as the sun was gently rising. It was a beautiful early morning, quiet and still, with a great blue sky overhead. I sat for a while in my favorite recliner, absorbing it all. It felt *wonderful, joyous*; it was a great day to celebrate being *alive* ... except for the cloud that is hanging over all of us right now. The dark cloud of worry and fear, anxiety and anticipation, longing and confusion, as we all desperately want to get our “normal lives” back as soon as possible. I want to be able to do my *normal* activities ... run my errands without having to worry about facemasks and sanitation ... get back to the swimming pool ... enjoy an outing at a park ... give people a hug ... get back to normal worship again. The reality is ... we *can't* right now.

Earlier this week, as I was looking ahead to the scriptures for today, I found myself wondering: *What am I going to talk about? What do these passages have to say to us, today?* Where is the Word from God to us, *now*? It wasn't immediately obvious. At least, not to me. But as I sat with them for a few days, thoughts started to come together. *God still speaks!* Sometimes, it's just hard for us to *hear*.

Let's start with the psalm. “Bless our God, O peoples, let the sound of his praise be heard, who has kept us among the living, and has not let our feet slip.” It's a psalm of praise to God, thanking God for rescuing the people from a great calamity. Notice the use of the words “we” and “us” and “our” in the first several verses: God “has kept *us* among the living;” “*we* went through fire and water;” God has “brought *us* out to a spacious place.” The psalmist isn't writing about just his *personal* experience – he is writing about a *collective* experience, a *shared* experience, something that his whole people or nation went through *together*. It is clear from the writer's words that it was a very difficult, challenging, and stressful experience: “you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried. You brought us into the net; you laid burdens on our backs; you let people ride over our heads; we went through fire and water.” The references are vague; it's not entirely clear what specific calamity the writer is referring to – maybe a war, or a famine, or a plague – but that's one of the beauties of psalms like this; they can be applicable in a variety of different circumstances. In this case, a variety of different *shared* experiences, like the one we're all sharing right now. It's clear from the psalm that – whatever the calamity was – it's over now. “God has kept us among the living, and has not let our feet slip.” God has “brought us out to a spacious place.” *We're* not there yet – we're a long way from this plague being over. But the psalm gives us a glimpse of how we will feel when it *is* over. “I will come into your house with burnt offerings; I will pay you my vows” ... “I will tell what God has done for me.” “Truly God has listened; he has given heed to the words of my prayer.” When this is over, we're going to feel like celebrating. We're going to feel like worshipping. We're going to feel like giving thanks to God.

The psalm reminds us that God's people have endured some very hard experiences in the past. In today's world, with all our modern conveniences, and with the relative peace our country has enjoyed for a long time now, it's easy to forget that sometimes things come along which impact *all* of us in very dramatic ways. 88,000 people in our country have died as a result of this disease, in a very short amount of time. To give you some points of comparison: 36,000 Americans died during the Korean War; 58,000 died during the Vietnam War; we're rapidly approaching the point where the number of Americans who have died from COVID-19 is greater than our deaths in *both* those wars, *combined*. From a sheer numbers standpoint, we haven't experienced anything this big since World War II. Most of us weren't alive back then, or were young children when it was going on. We're not used to calamities this big, this life-changing. We're not used to being "tried as silver is tried," not used to "going through fire and water." But the psalmist reminds us: we've gotten through things like this before. There will be a time for celebration, a time when we thank God for giving heed to our prayers.

Turning now to the reading from 1 Peter ... it's a bit harder to find immediate relevance in this one. The central issue in this passage is what to do and how to act when people are mistreating you because you've chosen to do the right thing. That's an important topic, worthy of a good sermon on some other, more normal occasion. The people Peter was writing to were suffering because they were *doing good*. Peter gives them some advice about how to handle it, some encouragement, some words of wisdom. For most of us right now, that's really not a central issue. I certainly don't feel that I have been being mistreated for trying to do the right thing lately; you all have been very kind and gracious and patient and loving and understanding in the midst of all this, which has been a blessing. If there's anyone out there who does feel like you're being unjustly persecuted right now, well, Peter's got some words to say that will bring you some renewed strength and hope. You can explore those on your own.

But the second half of that passage, which is more theological and less practical, may actually be more relevant for all of us today. Peter reminds us that "Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God." What's God's ultimate *goal*? To bring us closer to him. *That's* worth holding on to! God went to *great lengths* to bring us closer to him. Sending Jesus here, to be with us, to be one of us, to live like we live, to be betrayed, and suffer, and die ... all for what? All for *us*! All for *you*! God loves you *so much* that he came *all the way down*. *All the way down*!

But God didn't stop just *here*. There are some wonderful lines in this passage, somewhat cryptic lines, about Christ's ministry *between* his death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead. "He went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison." What's Peter talking about? He's talking about Jesus descending to the dead. To the *place* of the dead, the place where the people who had died *before* Christ died had gone. The "underworld," it has been called; "Sheol," in Hebrew. He "descended into hell," to use the traditional language from the Apostles' Creed. Why did he go there? *Because he was on a rescue mission*. What did he do there? *He made a proclamation to the spirits in prison*. That is to say – he told them the gospel message. He gave them a *way out*. Peter reminds us about the story of the great flood in the early chapters of Genesis. The flood killed everybody on earth except for eight people: Noah, his three sons, and each of their wives. All the rest died! Why did they die? Why did God send the flood? Because of the tremendous amount of unrighteousness and evil in the human heart. All those people who perished – and oh, so many others – *they were all given a second chance*. Jesus died on the cross; he descended into hell, the abode of the dead; he preached the gospel; he gave them a chance to redeem themselves. Jesus came all the way down to earth – *and then he went down even further!* Why? *Because God is in the business of bringing people to him*. God is in the business of

bringing people good news, bringing people *hope*, bringing people *up*. Jesus came from heaven down to earth, from earth down to the underworld, then – on Easter – back up to earth, then – forty days later – back up to heaven. *All the way down, and all the way back up*; it is God’s ultimate *rescue* mission, designed to bring hope and salvation to *everyone* who responds in faith to the gospel message.

This coming Thursday, by the way, is the 40<sup>th</sup> day after Easter; it is the day we remember and celebrate Christ’s ascension into heaven. It’s a day for all of us to look up, and – no matter how discouraged or worried we may feel right now – remember that *God loves us*, remember that *Jesus came for us*, remember that God sent Jesus to rescue us, to draw us close to him.

That’s what I hear in the passage from 1 Peter this morning: *words of hope*. Not so much a word about the plight our country and our world are going through right now, but maybe something *better*: a reminder that the sufferings here on earth are not the end-all-be-all. God’s got a plan in place, a great rescue mission, that *we* get to be part of. One day we’ll wake up to the sounds of the birds chirping in the trees while the sun is gently rising on a beautiful morning with a great blue sky overhead, and there won’t be a dark cloud hanging over us. There won’t be a dark cloud hanging over us *ever again*.

Finally, let’s turn to the gospel passage. These are all words that Jesus says to his disciples, not long before the end of his ministry, not long before he leaves them. He reminds them to live as he taught them to live, to do what he taught them to do. But then he tells them what he will do for them: “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.” He’s talking about the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth. Jesus was about to leave, but he was not leaving them alone. He was not *abandoning* them to the powers-that-be in the world. He was making sure *Someone* would be with them, another precious part of the Holy Trinity. That Holy Spirit would *never* leave them; it would be with them *forever*. “I will not leave you orphaned,” Jesus says to them. “*I will not leave you orphaned!*”

Those disciples were distressed. Jesus was leaving; they didn’t fully understand how or why; they knew their lives were better off *with* him; they didn’t want him to go; they didn’t want to feel abandoned; they didn’t want to be left *alone*. Jesus *had* to go; God had work for him to do; he *couldn’t* stick around. So Jesus reassured them: *God will still be with you*. Jesus himself will still be there, after a fashion; they may not be able to *see* him, they may not be able to *touch* him, but they can *feel* him, *feel* his presence, his comfort, his love. He can still lead them, guide them, comfort them, empower them. “In a little while the world will no longer see me,” Jesus said, “but *you* will see me.” Maybe not in quite the same way, maybe not with their physical eyes, but with their *spiritual* eyes, with the eyes of their *heart*. “On that day,” says Jesus, “you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.” Jesus is in God, and we are in Jesus, and Jesus is in us. We are *united* with Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, even when we are *separate* from him, even when *he* is in heaven and *we* are still here on earth.

This – *this* – is a message we need to hold onto, a message we need to *cling* to, every day, but perhaps especially in times like this, when things feel scary, when it’s a beautiful day and it still feels like there’s this dark cloud hanging over us. *There’s something on the other side of that cloud!* There’s a bright sun shining – a bright *Son* shining, reaching out to us, down to us, *loving us, comforting us*, even in the midst of our worry and fear, anxiety and anticipation, longing and confusion. *We’re not alone in all this*. God hasn’t abandoned us; we haven’t been left *orphaned*. *Jesus is here. Right here. By our side*. Bringing *light* to our day and *hope* to our path. Always and forever ... *Jesus is here!*

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