

*“Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” – (Rom. 5:1)*

Last Sunday I discussed with you the story of Noah and the great flood, and the early stages of life for farmers during the Dust Bowl, and how both feel like an appropriate story for us today. The Creator of life and all of creation judges the world’s sin through catastrophic rainfall and billowing clouds of dirt, and yet, still preserves life. This terrible, horrifying (not so "G-rated") story is full of death and destruction, judgment and punishment, yet humanity is forgiven. We find our sin is serious, but God’s creative love is stronger. After all the destruction that is said and done in our lives, we find salvation; we find a covenant, a promise, a sign in the sky, in the form of a rainbow to remind us that we are protected and God is with us through anything and everything. More importantly, we discover that under that rainbow, there is a love in action, there is a peace to be made, there is a hope to be seen.

But beyond the story of the Great Flood, or the Dust Bowl, or even today’s coronavirus, or the great protests of the 2020’s and the destruction they have caused, there is a deeper story of heroic perseverance. Like Noah quarantined with his family in the ark, one hundred and fifty thousand feet above sea-level for 150 days, and like the farmers who rode out the Dust Bowl with their families in the Texas Panhandle, sure that the next year would bring better weather for their barren crops, we too are “next-year people”. We are those same “next-year people” now, who against all odds, push at the limits of hope and somehow manage to endure one unimaginable hardship after another. But we have to wonder, if God has truly brought the Flood, and the Dust, and the coronavirus, and the martyrdom of the oppressed upon us, “God’s people” – we can’t help but ask, “can God be trusted?” Even if there is a rainbow in the sky reminding God and us of the promises God has made with us, can God truly be trusted? Is this endurance

and hope we possess in order to face the problems that come our way our own? Or does it come from something beyond us, or perhaps maybe even given to us by someone more than ourselves?

In our epistle lesson this morning, we heard the words Paul wrote to the Romans from the church he started in Corinth. Paul reminds the Romans (and us) that we don't merely do bad things; we are simply out of harmony with God. As Adam and Eve and King Saul, were disobedient, so are we disobedient. As Cain and David were passionately rebellious, so are we passionately rebellious. As King Solomon and those who built the tower of Babel were arrogant and proud, so are we arrogant and proud. And as all the people living during Noah's days “had become thoroughly evil...and that every idea their minds thought up was always completely evil,” so too are we “thoroughly evil.” In other words, we deliberately rebel. We do what we please. We go directly against God and God's will. But part of the time we “God's people,” we “the faithful,” we “disciples,” work hard to win God's approval, only to fail. We lack peace within ourselves and with others as a result. Therefore, we still stand condemned and deserving of punishment for our sins.

“But God...”. The two most important words in all the Bible. “But God,” means that God intervenes and changes the course of what is to ultimately happen to us. In other words, “God acts, for us.” The next two most important words in all the Bible. “For us.” We could not remove ourselves from the bondage of our sin and selfishness. We were too addicted to the disease, and the disease was too rampant, the separation was too severe, the spiritual relationship too strained. We were helpless and broken.

“But God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and the livestock that were with him in the ark, and he sent a wind over the earth, and the waters receded” (Gen. 8:1).

Joseph said to his brothers, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives” (Gen. 50:20).

“David stayed in the desert strongholds and in the hills of the Desert of Ziph. Day after day Saul searched for him, but God did not give David into his hands” (1 Sam. 23:14).

“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8).

“But with God all things are possible” (Matt. 19:26).

Therefore, as proof from these verses, as God’s children, we can put our faith in God, because we know God loves us. We are his creation and still part of his covenant with creation. We can put our hope in God, because Christ, his only Son, gave himself up for us. Therefore, Yes! We can trust God, because God keeps his promises. Especially in the giving of Jesus Christ, which is God’s ultimate promise kept, for us.

I’m reminded that in Paul’s letters the word *therefore* stands like a swinging door. Coming before the *therefore* is the mighty work of God in his Son, Jesus Christ. Moving from it is the awesome responsibility of Christian living and our duty as a disciple of Jesus Christ. Like a slave set free by a good master, we choose to serve out of love and gratitude.

“Therefore, by entering through faith into what God has always wanted to do for us—set us right with him, make us fit for him—we have it all together with God because of our Master Jesus. And that’s not all: We throw open our doors to God and discover at the same moment that he has already thrown open his door to us. We find ourselves standing where we always hoped we might stand—out in the wide open spaces of God’s grace and glory, standing tall and shouting our praise” (Romans 5:1-5, The Message).

In other words, God is the One who makes us right, who gives us peace, who brings us into grace, and offers us hope for the future. Despite our own best efforts and mighty struggles, God is always before us offering us a hand and inviting us to take the first step toward “the wide-open spaces of God’s grace and glory” (The Message). This is what we call “prevenient grace.” In the words of theologian Paul Tillich, this means to “accept that you are accepted.” Remember that you do not have to earn, win, or beg for God’s love, because it is already given freely to you. But to be made righteous, or to be accepted doesn’t mean to be “pure” or “good” but rather to be in harmony, in right relationship, both with God and with neighbor.

Therefore, by faith we are made in a right relationship with God, looking to Jesus Christ as our example in living that relationship out with God. We, God’s people and disciples of Jesus, are walking into the future unafraid as children under the rainbow, children of the covenant and promises of God. We are blessed, ready to be instruments for the world. Grace, accepted by faith, makes us sons and daughters of God. That is what God always longed for from us under the rainbow. Not robots run amuck, or rebels wild and rampant, but children to lovingly share in the promises of God, with God, and with each other.

However, though we may share in God’s promises, Paul addresses the challenges that we may face in our lives. Paul names the suffering challenges, as feeling “hemmed in with troubles” (The Message). Paul does not deny present suffering but asks us to look deeper and longer to see what may emerge as we face the challenges. Can we get a new perspective on our challenges? Can we see God at work amid difficulties? Can we cultivate patience and deepen trust? Can we see the rainbow? Can we see God’s promises being fulfilled for us even now?

Paul’s words ring truth for still today: “We continue to shout our praise even when we’re hemmed in with troubles, because we know how troubles can develop passionate patience in us,

and how that patience in turn forges the tempered steel of virtue, keeping us alert for whatever God will do next. In alert expectancy such as this, we’re never left feeling shortchanged. Quite the contrary—we can’t round up enough containers to hold everything God generously pours into our lives through the Holy Spirit!”

See, God is able to do a new thing, working through difficulties and troubles and strengthening our character and our hope so we are not disappointed and often are surprised, kind of like a child spotting a rainbow. Being justified by faith, says Paul, we are able to be faithful, therefore, under the rainbow, even when we encounter difficult challenges... there is a nation of faithful children, and we are still those “next-year” people. Amen.