

STANDING UP TO THE CORONAVIRUS

Psalm 91

Romans 8:26-39

March 29, 2020

Romans 8 has been a go-to text at times of uncertainty, upheaval, or disaster (fires and earthquakes in CA, going to war in Iraq, 9/11, and so on.) In fact, one of the great and terrible challenges of the 20th century affected the translation of the Bible. J.B. Phillips was making his wonderful translation of the New Testament during the blitz of London in the Second World War. Verse 38 that says “I am sure that neither death nor life nor angels nor principalities (and so on) will never be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” comes out of J.B. Phillips’ pen, “I am *absolutely convinced* that neither death, nor life, [and so on] shall be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

This is a touchstone passage, for in it we are reminded that creation, and therefore humanity, is not what it is supposed to be, and that creation, and therefore humanity, “groans” in all kinds of ways for healing. There is a powerful Christian song from Andrew Peterson called “Is He worthy?” that asks “Do you wish you could see it all made new?” It –the fear, the worry, terror, even -- of this current virus can be made new by faith in what the Bible tells us. We just have to grasp it again, and hold on to us as if were ours . . . cuz it is!

So, I’ll start out with Romans 8:28, which says, “For we know that God causes all things to work together for the good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purposes.” In the midst of all the various forms of “groaning,” God is working out God’s “good purposes.”

So, what is ‘the good’ God is doing with and in what we are experiencing?

God is letting us realize just how vulnerable we humans are in a broken world. Indeed, were it not for God's "regular mercies," we would experience even more deadly threats to our existence

The world is not what God intended it to be; it is broken because of our sin, and we, apart from God's mercies are so very vulnerable.

Next point: God is letting us experience just how much we are not in control of our existence. We tend to think that we can make plans, work the plans, and the plans will all lead to their goal, the great, grand future we ourselves have imagined for ourselves. It simply doesn't work that way. And God is letting us experience that.

I went to seminary (was a couple of years behind) the granddaughter of Scottish 20th century theologian Donald Baillie. One of his books is titled, "A Diary of Private Prayer," and in one of the prayers—for March 9, incidentally—he prays, "For it is little that I have power to do or to ordain. Not of my own will am I here, not of my own will shall I soon pass hence. Of all that which shall come to me this day, very little will be such as I have chosen for myself." A hard word for someone who likes to be in control, like me! Thankfully, Baillie goes on to pray, "It is thou who dost keep in Thy grasp the threads of this day's life, and who alone knowest what lies before me to do or to suffer. But because Thou art my Father, I am not afraid." The sooner we learn we are not in control of everything the better it goes for our souls . . . and for our anxieties.

Point three is one that requires some faith, but I believe it to be true: God is using the common crisis to minimize our divisions and divisiveness. The last few years have witnessed communities and nations being torn apart. The spreading of the Coronavirus is bringing us together to face a common threat. I believe God is using it to help people experience again what it "feels like" to work together for the common good.

And God is, on the heels of this, showing us (again) that when we all begin to look out for others, life is richer. Even if we are still motivated by self-interest, the mutual cooperation of self-interested people can make for more tasting of the Shalom God wills

for the world. Hoarding all the toilet paper at Wal-Mart is self-defeating, for it only makes it harder for others to be healthy, not only in sanitary ways, but in ways of morals. I've heard of people going into hospitals and stealing toilet paper from their restrooms. So hoarding endangers the hoarder. It makes people more desperate. (Just in passing, I think people are coming to see that grocery stores will be open, and their fear of scarcity is loosening its grip on them and us.) And anyway, I think that we are learning to think of the consequences for the whole, Just think if we could learn to look out for the whole community in non-crisis times. What a better world this would be.

Just as another aside, which doesn't really go with my point, but one grocery checker suggested we be at the door before it opens, 'cause there'll be a line. The delivery trucks have been there at night, and the night shift has restocked the selves with what they can. And also, there are Senior Citizen early hours: 8:00 a.m. at Whole Foods on Tuesdays; Walgreens Tuesdays from 6:00 am – 7:00 a.m.; Meijer Senior hours are Tuesdays and Thursdays from 7-8 a.m., and Target on Wednesdays from 8 – 9.

Let's get back to Romans.

As is written,

For thy sake we are being killed
all the day long;
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us, for I am absolutely convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God I Christ Jesus our Lord.

In this time of danger all around us, God is, again in mercy, bringing us to the place to cry out for healing. This crisis is all way beyond what our outstanding medical systems can handle; we need help from beyond the system. And you know what? We have it. We are protected by God's love all around. What a mercy! And even people who ordinarily do not think of praying are praying . . . big time.

You know what? God is, at a deeper level, -- at least for those who are being attentive, -- helping us realize (again) that it only works—life on this planet only works—when we call out to and depend on the Creator and Redeemer.

The Vancouver Sun ran an article with the title, “The Great Awakening.” It caught the eye of a friend of mine in Washington because I believe we are on the verge of, and may well be into, the greatest spiritual awakening the world has ever seen. The article wasn’t about what I’m thinking about, but it did talk about how this is all “waking us up” to the realities we are avoiding.

Things are changing. The world will not be the same once this is over. We’ll get into new routines of doing things—learning how to communicate better on line, as we are here; thinking about what’s good for the other guy; carrying out commerce online . . . yeah, maybe. But we also will have to fall back further and more profoundly on faith in a victorious God who was killed, and who then lived again. What an opportunity to make sense of things around us through the lense of the Gospel, huh? God, may it be a Great Awakening!

And, as he often does, Paul goes beyond our current perspective, offering us a God’s eye view of what’s going on. God is awakening us to the “groaning” of creation. Creation is at times smarter than we are. Creation recognizes that this is not “the best of all possible worlds,” and groans for the truly “best world.” As the Apostle Paul puts it, creation is groaning to be “set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God (v. 21). Did you see there what God has in mind—and in hand -- for us? ‘Glory of children of God.’ Yay!

When we groan within ourselves for the healing of the planet, we are joining the planet itself, in sensitivity to the planet’s Creator, crying out for healing which God even now is about.

In it all, and through it all, God is using it all for the greater good – “in all things toward the good” – of being “conformed to the image of His Son” (Rom. 8:29). God is

using it all to make us more like the One True Human, Jesus of Nazareth, who lives by giving Himself away for the good of others.

These are a few of the things I see God doing in the midst of the spread of this awful virus.

Amen.