

## An Assassination Attempt, the Providence of God and Human Freedom

Matthew 5:43-48; Isaiah 55:8-11

“I interrupt this program to bring you breaking news”, the newscaster says. Well, breaking news a few weeks ago of the assassination attempt on Donald Trump’s life—and the God-talk that followed it—has interrupted my scheduled sermons on the parables of Jesus.

So instead of a sermon on a parable of Jesus, I’m preaching today on a teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.

This is not a political sermon but a theological one, on the providence of God and one that examines the uses and misuses of scripture. So let’s begin there.

### I

Though little note was made of the death of the spectator at the rally and the two others who were wounded, theological declarations were made that God had spared Donald Trump’s life. I’ve known people whose faith was deeply challenged when, having suffered a tragedy, they heard such unreflective theological and spiritual talk. Will-of-God talk. Talk about God sparing some when others died. I cast no stones; I have and we all have moments of unreflective theological and spiritual talk.

But this is what provoked or inspired (take your pick) this sermon: first, the talk that God had spared Donald Trump's life because he was "anointed" by God, called to be President again. And secondly, the use of the Bible to back up such God-talk.

I will not get into the first issue, Trump's anointing by God, else I'll get distracted by political argumentation. Outrage is like a drug in America today, and I'm trying to cut down!

However, I do wish to tackle head on the use of scripture to back up the theological and spiritual notion that God spared Trump's life because of his "special providence" in God's plan for the nation.

Soon after the assassination attempt, I started hearing Bible verses being quoted. The first, Ephesians 6:11

Put on the whole armor of God that you may be able to withstand the wiles of the devil.

Trump spokesman Caroline Sunshine used this verse on Fox News to prove that God had intervened to save him. He had been saved, she said, because he was wearing the full armor of God. And to underline this theological statement she pointed out that the bullet aimed at Donald Trump was fired at—wait for it—6:11 p.m.! I awoke at 7:15 this morning and Matthew 7:15 says: "Beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves." I hope Jesus wasn't talking about me!

Soon after the assassination attempt, at the Republican National Convention, speaker after speaker and prayer after prayer cited Bible verses to prove God's special protection over their candidate. One of Trump's former cabinet members quoted Isaiah 54:17— "No weapon formed against you shall prosper", and used it to claim God's anointing of him. I'm not making fun of the simple piety that turns to the Bible for help in understanding or finding meaning in uncertain times. What I object to is the use of scripture for partisan political purposes.

## II

So today I turn to a teaching in the Sermon on the Mount that helps us take a deeper look at the connection between the providential goodness of God and the good or bad fortune we experience. Jesus is teaching about the love of one's enemy and says:

...I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? ... Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5:44-45,48)

These verses most often are used, rightly so, to underline the love of God for all of us as the basis for our love of others, even our enemies.

But there is another meaning here that I wish to probe in these verses, a meaning explored by America's greatest theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, in a sermon he preached

entitled, “The Providence of God.” Jesus’ words about the sun and rain given to all people by God led Niebuhr to say:

The love of God is an impartial goodness beyond good and evil. [He was talking about our notions of good and evil.] The providence of God is an impartial concern for all men without any special privilege in it.<sup>1</sup>

Our prayers are apt someday to be, as William James puts it, “an effort to lobby in the courts of the Almighty for special favors.”

The Psalms resound with the trust that God will protect us from harm, like this verse:

For in a time of trouble, He shall hide me, and He shall set me on a Rock (Psalm 27:5)

The whole book of Job is a fist-shaking repudiation of the simplistic theology that all suffering comes from sin and all good favor comes from righteous living. We can wrack our brains and search our hearts trying to understand such things, trying to figure out how and why things happen. I can think of two instances where people came to Jesus asking about the sin of people who had suffered tragedy, a wall that fell on Galilean workers, and a man born blind. Jesus answered in effect: the issue at hand is not their lives, but yours!

So, in our Call to Gathering this morning, we read together Psalm 131. We see in it a person who has come through great perplexity and doubt to a place of spiritual peace:

My Lord, my heart is not lifted up,  
my eyes are not raised too high.

I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me.

But I have calmed and quieted my soul,  
like a child quieted at its mother's breast  
like a child that is quieted is my soul.

The Psalmist has moved from a child's simplistic faith, through complexity and questioning to a simplicity on the yonder side of complexity. Sometimes by grace we can move to such a place.

The Psalmist ends with these important words: "Hope in the Lord, for this time forth and forever more." Hope, not certainty. "We walk by faith not by sight", Paul says, and this: "Who hopes for what they see?"

The word "hope" in the Old Testament literally means "waiting for God." We hope in what we cannot see nor understand, trusting in God. It is a form of reverence lacking in much of religion these days.

So let's hold onto reverence and the holy reticence it brings as we think about and talk about God. We can be so assured that we know God's thoughts and God's ways. But God says to us in Isaiah 55:

For my thoughts are *not* your thoughts and my ways are not your ways, says the Lord.

For as the heavens are higher than the earth so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts.

It's so easy for people to presume we can know fully God's ways and thoughts. Then things happen, and our theology crashes, and we have to rethink our faith.

So we come to church and re-learn reverence as we sing it with hymns like this:

Immortal, invisible God only wise,  
In light inaccessible hid from our eyes.

If we didn't enter with such reverence, we leave with it.

Then Isaiah goes on with words from God that save us from hopelessness and despair:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55:8-11)

Here is the hope and faith that in the midst of our despair and not-knowing about God, God is working God's purposes out. God is committed to all human flourishing, and the flourishing of Creation itself.

#### IV

One way of ending this sermon would be to close with: "Don't try to make sense of the world. Theology is a blind alley. Bewilderment is the only honest path.

But I cannot leave us there. So, let's talk about the mystery of God's providence, a providence that works with us in the terrible and real freedom of being human to achieve God's purposes—even when we cannot see it.

It was what Paul was pointing to with his words in Romans 8:28

For we know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose.

Everything! Both the good and the bad. And the great good news, if we take Jesus' words seriously, is that God is at work for good not only with those who love God and are called according to God's purpose, *but with all God's children, in every time and place*, for God's desire is the thriving of all people.

At the end of Genesis, Joseph's brothers are cowering in fear as they kneel before their brother Joseph. Years before this moment, they had sold Joseph into slavery, but

Joseph is now a Prince of Egypt and has the power of life and death over them. Would he wreak revenge on them? But Joseph said to them:

Fear not, for am I in the place of God? You meant evil against me but God meant it for good.

Or, in a translation I love, “You planned ill against me, [but] God planned-it-over for good.” We have a God who in the midst of our freedom to do right or wrong keeps planning, then planning-it-over to achieve our good and God’s good and the world’s good.

I’ve just finished an astonishing book on Genesis written by the novelist Marilynne Robinson. It’s called *Reading Genesis*. It ponders on almost every page how God works with us fallible people to achieve God’s good purposes, including, in her words, “patriarchs who act badly and pagans who act well.” God is working God’s purposes out.

Trump is spared. Jesus is not. Think of that. God is working God’s purposes out in it all. Marilynne Robinson writes,

...We do not know how to judge or where to blame because events are working themselves out at another scale and toward other purposes more than we can begin to grasp.<sup>2</sup>

Hope in the Lord, you people of God, from this time on and for evermore!

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1. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Justice, and Mercy* ed. Ursula M. Niebuhr (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1974), 15.
2. Marilyn Robinson, *Reading Genesis* (N.Y.: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2024), p.197.