

“PERIL, PRESENCE, AND PROMISE”

Genesis 28:10-19a; Romans 8:12-25

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Some years ago, I attended a weekend religious retreat, which began with an ice-breaker. Participants were asked to reveal something about themselves by citing a favorite verse of Scripture. For the most part, the responses were predictable: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want” . . . “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son” . . . “Nothing can separate us from the love God in Jesus Christ our Lord.” But one of the responses was totally unexpected and actually produced a few snickers. A middle aged man said, “I like a line from one of the psalms: ‘God’s in his heaven, and all’s right with the world.’”

Of course, the psalms are a type of poetry, but the line of poetry this man quoted was not from the Bible at all; it was from a 19th Century poem by Robert Browning entitled *Pippa Passes*. The man at the retreat was blissfully unaware of this, and he may also have been unaware that the Bible has a very different view of the world and God’s relationship with the world than the view reflected in the famous poem. Perhaps Browning wrote these words in a moment of great joy and contentment; he was saying that everything is just as it should be. You know, “The kids are all tucked into bed. I’m sitting by a warm, cozy fire, sipping a glass of sherry. God’s in his heaven, and all’s right with the world.”

You and I don’t begrudge Browning his moment of satisfaction; but still, it’s worth noting that the Scriptures take a wider view and have a contrasting message. The Bible asserts that all’s not right with the world, and further asserts that God has come down from heaven into the world to make things right. To put it another way, the biblical view of life is both realistic and hopeful. God creates the world and declares it to be good; but God’s creation is quickly spoiled by sin and suffering. Bad news dominates the headlines every day. But the good news is that, instead of watching from heaven in pity or apathy as this tragedy plays out, God chooses to bridge the gap between heaven and earth, to become involved in our troubles and sorrows, and transform the flawed old creation into a glorious new creation.

We see this drama unfold in both of today’s Scripture readings. In the story from Genesis, the Hebrew patriarch Jacob is presented not as a hero of faith, but as the scoundrel he truly is. He is a man in peril, and it is a peril largely of his own making. He has tricked his father Isaac and his twin brother Esau into giving him the family birthright. Now that his deception is fully recognized, Esau is pursuing him with a vengeance, and Jacob is now a fugitive, running for his life. He stops to spend the night out in the desert, where he is overwhelmed with feelings of guilt, fear, and loneliness.

Jacob certainly doesn’t expect any visitation from God, especially in that godforsaken place and to a person as ungodly as himself. But God shows up anyway – in a desert, of all places; and to a trickster, of all people. When Jacob finally crashes for the night, God is revealed to him in a dream – the vision of a staircase stretching from heaven to earth, filled with God’s messengers; and the very voice of God declaring that he, Jacob, will realize the promise given to his grandfather Abraham, the promise of descendants who will inherit their own land and be a blessing to all

peoples. What adds to the realism of this encounter with God is that Jacob sleeps through it all; he recognizes God's presence and promise only when he awakens, only in hindsight.

Do you see how the story of Jacob at Bethel is the biblical story in miniature? The theme of the Scriptures is not, "God's in his heaven, and all's right with the world." No, the theme is that all's not right with the world – that the world is in peril, individual lives are in peril, the whole human race is in peril; and this peril is often the consequence of our own selfishness and unfaithfulness. But the storyline doesn't stop there. A gracious God does not abandon us in our times of peril, even the peril we have created for ourselves. God remains in relationship with us, even when we don't recognize it, when we see it only in the rear-view mirror. What's more, God is not only present with us in our times of peril; God also offers us a way out of our peril. God offers the promise of redemption and fulfilment, even for people who seem to be beyond redemption.

James Howell is a United Methodist pastor in North Carolina who contributes frequently to our church publications. Howell once wrote a whole book of recollections from his childhood, youth, and adulthood, describing occasions and places where God was there, but at the time he did not know it. He gave the book the intriguing title, *Struck from Behind*, because only in retrospect could he say, "Aha! God was in that moment, that person, that circumstance."

But Howell goes a step further in his confession. He says that when God was there in those situations, he not only didn't know it; he wasn't seeking it. Howell doesn't disclose whether he was on the run like Jacob was – running from his family, his past, his demons, his God. But Howell does acknowledge that he wasn't expecting to run into God! He wasn't praying or on some sort of spiritual quest when he had these encounters. God just showed up, beyond his anticipating and beyond his deserving. Even better, God was not only present to him in those times and places; God also showed him a path forward and promised him a more meaningful future.

In today's reading from Romans, Paul widens the scope of the biblical story beyond human beings to include the whole created order. For the apostle to the Gentiles as for the writer of Genesis, all's not right with the world. Paul speaks of "the sufferings of this present time" (Romans 8:18). He notes that "the creation was subjected to futility" (v. 20) and is in "bondage to decay" (v. 23). He says that "the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies" (vv. 22-23).

Paul may be referring in part to the physical suffering of the early Christians at the hands of a temporal power, the Roman Empire. But he is also referring to the grip of a cosmic power – the magnetic force field of evil and disease, decay and death, which pulls us into its orbit and swallows us up in suffering. Something more than human sin is doing this work of destruction, and it is consuming God's entire creation, Paul says.

I cannot imagine a more telling description of the peril you and I are experiencing right now. All's not right with the world; and, yes, some of our suffering is clearly of our own making. Global warming and systemic racism are not the result of bad fortune; they are the result of bad choices freely made by human beings. But at the same time, our suffering is due in part to factors beyond our control – a virus we cannot see, a cure we can only hope for and wait for, a death that

will eventually come to all of us, if not from a virus then from some other malady or calamity. To use Paul's word, one hears a lot of "groaning" these days, within ourselves and throughout all creation.

However, let's not overlook the image Paul uses to describe this groaning. He likens it to labor pains, which (I'm told!) are awful in the present moment but also signal that something wondrously creative is going on. A pain that feels like death itself ultimately holds the promise of new life. Now, Paul isn't presuming to offer a primer on human childbirth; as a man, he's hardly in a position to tell women what only they can feel. But he has undoubtedly observed childbirth, and he uses it as a metaphor to describe God's work in the old creation. Far from being absent or apathetic, God is present with us in our suffering and groaning, even when we do not know God's presence or actively seek it. Better yet, like a mid-wife in a birthing room, God promises to deliver us into a new creation where, as the writer of Revelation describes it, "death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away. And the one seated on the throne will say, 'See, I am making all things new'" (Revelation 21:4-5a).

You and I keep trying to envision what the world will look like on the other side of our grim new normal, but as always, we are drawing things too small. We picture filling Yankee Stadium again with happy spectators, filling the Woodbury Diner again with happy customers, filling our schoolrooms again with happy students. What God has in mind is not another new normal that is little better than the old one. What God promises to deliver is an entirely new creation.

But let's be clear about one other thing: for Paul, the turning point from the old creation to the new one is not a natural event like childbirth. The turning point is a person, the God-Man, Jesus Christ, who comes from outside the natural world but becomes deeply imbedded in it. When all's not right with the world, God doesn't remain secluded in the safety of heaven; God comes down to earth in the form of a human being. Jesus lives and dies and is raised from the dead in order to vanquish the old creation and usher in a new creation. Stop and think about it: Jesus himself experiences the peril of the human condition; he is empowered by the presence of God to face that peril with courage and faithfulness; and he claims God's promise that life, not death, is God's final word.

Friends, you and I live in this same state of peril; but lest we forget, God's presence and promise are offered to us also. So it might be fair to ask, what are we groaning about?