

“Who’s Driving This Thing?”
Reverend Bill Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
28th Sunday in Ordinary Time
October 13, 2019

First Scripture Reading: Psalm 23 (RSV)

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want; ²he makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters; ³he restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake. ⁴Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me. ⁵Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies; thou anointest my head with oil, my cup overflows. ⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Second Scripture Reading: Isaiah 40:21-31 (The Message)

Have you not been paying attention? Have you not been listening? Haven’t you heard these stories all your life? Don’t you understand the foundation of all things? God sits high above the round ball of earth. The people look like mere ants. He stretches out the skies like a canvas— yes, like a tent canvas to live under. He ignores what all the princes say and do. The rulers of the earth count for nothing. Princes and rulers don’t amount to much. Like seeds barely rooted, just sprouted, They shrivel when God blows on them. Like flecks of chaff, they’re gone with the wind.

²⁵⁻²⁶“So—who is like me? Who holds a candle to me?” says The Holy. Look at the night skies: Who do you think made all this? Who marches this army of stars out each night, counts them off, calls each by name —so magnificent! so powerful!— and never overlooks a single one?

²⁷⁻³¹Why would you ever complain, O Jacob, or, whine, Israel, saying, “God has lost track of me. He doesn’t care what happens to me”? Don’t you know anything? Haven’t you been listening? God doesn’t come and go. God *lasts*. He’s Creator of all you can see or imagine. He doesn’t get tired out, doesn’t pause to catch his breath. And he knows *everything*, inside and out. He energizes those who get tired, gives fresh strength to dropouts. For even young people tire and drop out, young folk in their prime stumble and fall. But those who wait upon God get fresh strength. They spread their wings and soar like eagles, they run and don’t get tired, they walk and don’t lag behind.



Sermon: “Who’s Driving This Thing?”

In Greek mythology, Pandora is the first woman created by Hephaestus, the Greek god of craftsmen and sculptors. When the world was made, only good things were used and everything evil that was left over was stored in a box, never to be opened. According to the myth, Pandora, in her curiosity, opened the box just to have a quick peak inside, to see what was in there. When she did, all of the evils that were inside escaped out into the world: greed, dishonesty, hatred, and chaos among them.¹

Now, of course, this is just another misogynistic “blame-it-on-the-woman” origin story common to most prehistoric myths. But that old tale was rolling around in my head this week as I read one story after another in my daily newspaper that underscored the depths of dishonesty and selfishness and depravity to which human beings will apparently go in order to preserve their power and privilege. There’s so much good in the world but it can be so hard to see when there are so many people wreaking havoc.

There’s this whole impeachment inquiry going on in congress right now. Did he, or didn’t he? As congress seeks an answer to that question, our president has refused to cooperate or allow officials close to him to cooperate either. And whatever the conclusion, this process has revealed more of the ugliness of people in power, while at the same time tearing at the very fabric of our democracy. All of this while Turkish military forces invade Syria, and in Yemen, a civil war rages that is essentially a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. In the meantime, refugees flee the violence only to find fear and hatred in the countries to whom they turn for protection. Climate change rolls on and still people in the seats of power refuse to acknowledge the damage being done to our environment or our role in it. Muslim minorities in China are gathered into camps and persecuted while the citizens of Hong Kong protest Chinese threats to their freedom, and American corporations wring their hands over whether they should do business with China or stand against the injustices perpetrated by the Chinese Government. Every time a story is reported that sounds crazy and out of control, something even crazier and more out of control emerges to take its place in the news cycle. It’s as if all the terrible things Greek mythology blamed Pandora for unleashing on the world are swirling around us, looking for a place to land.

But that's just the public stuff that's in the news. When we consider the personal trials we all face, well, sometimes daily life can be pretty staggering. I remember flying back to South Carolina for my father's funeral last summer. I was sort of floating in a cloud of grief and confusion, but not one of the hundreds of travelers moving through the airport with me or seated near me on the plane knew a thing about it. I assumed I looked pretty normal and that all those people walking past me had no idea of the turmoil churning inside me. Which got me to thinking about *them*. And I began to wonder, what secret burdens were they carrying that day? What pain flew beside them on their journeys? I couldn't be the only one and of course, I wasn't.

The Scottish author Ian MacLaren once wrote "Be [kind]; everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle."² And I believe those words are true. We all experience difficulty in our lives; sickness, loss, loneliness, worry. Some struggle to right wrongs. Some are bent under the weight of guilt. Some are twisted by old grudges and wounds that simply will not heal. Sometimes those things are just a lot of background noise, but at other times, those challenges and burdens stand shouting at us such that we can't hear or think of anything else.

And on those days; in those moments, we can find ourselves feeling very lost and very alone. The Greeks blamed the presence of such suffering in the world on Pandora's curiosity. But one other detail about that story stood out in my memory this week. According to the myths, when Pandora lifted the lid, she tried to close it again quickly, but she wasn't fast enough and all the evils of the world burst out of the box like a swarm of gnats.

The box wasn't completely empty though. There was one thing left inside: Hope. You see, as the story goes, when the Greek gods put all of the ills of the world into one box, they had a pretty good idea that one day some curious soul might open it. So, they tossed in hope as a help for when that day inevitably arrived.

There are of course, few things more powerful in the Judeo-Christian tradition than hope. The prophet Isaiah wrote of the coming judgement of Israel, but also of the hope for redemption after Israel fell and the Jews were taken into exile in Babylon. The passage we read today is an expression of that hope come to fruition. The Israelites knew oppression and evil; they knew what it was to be thrust into utterly desperate circumstances.

¹By the rivers of Babylon— there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. ²On the willows there we hung up our harps. ³For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" ⁴How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?³

Those words from Psalm 137 capture the sense of despair among those who had not only been taken from their homes, but who believed they had been spirited away from their God as well. But God, who is faithful and just, redeems the nation and calls the people home. It is this good news that Isaiah proclaims in the 40th chapter from which we read today. God, says Isaiah, created all that is. God sits on high and wields power over even the greatest kings and the mightiest princes:

"Princes and rulers don't amount to much. Like seeds barely rooted, just sprouted, they shrivel when God blows on them. Like flecks of chaff, they're gone with the wind."

In a time when it seemed that God was distant and powerless; that there were any number of kings on the earth willing to perpetrate evil; where the ills of the world seemed to run free, unopposed; Isaiah reminds the people that God is and always will be; that indeed, God is in control:

Why would you ever complain, O Jacob, or, whine, Israel, saying, "God has lost track of me. God doesn't care what happens to me"? Don't you know anything? Haven't you been listening? God doesn't come and go. God lasts. God is Creator of all you can see or imagine. God doesn't get tired out, doesn't pause to catch his breath. And God knows everything, inside and out.

The people doubt. The people worry. But Isaiah reminds them of God's power and presence, even through dark and difficult circumstances. Don't you know? Haven't you been listening?!? It is in God's great compassion and power that the Israelites found hope, through their darkest days. And it is here that we find hope too. As the Psalmist reminds us, there is no valley so dark and foreboding that God does not go with us.

And we know this because we have seen this. The difficulties we face today are daunting, but they are not the first hardships we have endured, and we are not the first generation to confront adversity. Through the dark days of the Great Depression, when families struggled to feed their children and many people lost everything that they had worked for, God was our guide and strength. *Don't you know? Haven't you been listening?*

Through the utter death and destruction of two world wars, through the genocide of millions, through the global scale of conflict and the countless personal losses of loved ones gone off to war who never came home, God was our guide and our strength. *Don't you know? Haven't you been listening?*

Through almost a half century of the cold war when the threat of nuclear annihilation was real and palpable; as an elementary school student in the 50's my mother had to wear dog tags in school and practice duck and cover drills in case of the unthinkable; through the terrors of the nuclear age, God was our guide and our strength. *Don't you know? Haven't you been listening?*

Through the turmoil of the 60's, when the struggle for African Americans and women to be treated equally by the law generated great social upheaval, all against the background of war in Vietnam and violence and hatred at home, God was our guide and our strength. *Don't you know? Haven't you been listening?*

The world can be a frightening place. There is much that is beauty and peace and kindness, but those things can sometimes be obscured by the clouds of sin and brokenness that pass before us. But for us there is hope. And that hope lies in our God who is all powerful, who created everything that is, and who wills for us peace and joy and every good thing. So, we hope in our God who is more powerful than the things we fear most, than the things that cause us distress, than the things over which we worry.

When I was growing up, every summer my family took a trip. It was always by car and my father almost always drove. But sometimes my parents would squabble about directions or when to stop. And almost always my sisters and I would shout instructions from the back seat as to which fast-food restaurant we should visit, which radio station we should be listening to, or how high the air conditioner should be.

And almost always, my dad would say to us all "Hey, who's driving this thing anyway?!?" The question was intended to remind those who might quibble with how the trip was going, that he and he alone had his hands on the wheel and the rest of us should just sit back and leave the driving to him. And that's what we need to remember when we worry, when we fret, when we struggle: Hey, who's driving this thing?

The future we face may seem to us, uncertain. But in the face of turmoil and chaos and uncertainty, we remember that God is our guide and our strength. *Don't you know? Haven't you been listening?* And maybe that's trite and oversimplified. Fair enough. But sometimes the oft repeated, simple statements carry the most truth. God *is* in control.

Now, that does not release us from our own responsibility to be disciples and to work for peace and justice and mercy in the world. But it should comfort us that our efforts are never expected to stand alone; what we do is always in support of what God is already doing.

When the world seems to have gone coo-coo for Cocoa Puffs, and everything feels out of control, we remember that God is in control. Because we know that, we can put our trust in God to make right what has been made wrong; we can trust that the life God requires of us; the path God invites us to follow, really is the best way. I know. That's a hard thing to do, sometimes. We want to be in control. It is in our nature to want to know what is going to happen and to control the outcome. But ultimately that's what faith is: letting go and letting God.

Don't you know? Haven't you been listening?!? The Lord is the everlasting God, Creator of the ends of the earth!

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ "Pandora's Box - New World Encyclopedia." 11 Oct. 2019, www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Pandora%27s_Box.

² 1898 January 6, Congregationalist, In Brief, Page 9, Volume 83, Issue 1, Boston. (ProQuest American Periodical Series) Also see: <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2010/06/29/be-kind/>

³ Psalm 137:1-4, NRSV