

“Questioning God”

Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-7; Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19;
Romans 5:1-8; Matthew 9:35-10:8

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I am always taken by the story of Sarah, who hears she is going to have a child. I can just imagine them sitting under the trees in the heat of the day, and Abraham wants to feed his guests as is the custom of hospitality in that time period. She overhears the conversation through the tent wall as she prepares the meal. And she laughs. She can't help but laugh at the thought that after all these years she will have a child. After all these years, her hopes would come true.

I struggle sometimes, as well, wondering when our hopes might come true. We often look to the Psalms as places where we can praise God. However, a lot of the Psalms express other emotions, themes, and feelings. Psalm 116, which we used in the opening today, is a celebration of returning to health. There are others, like Psalm 120, that calls out to God in the midst of strife, wondering where peace is. I guess I feel a little more Psalm 120 today than I do Psalm 116, wondering where peace is. Even asking questions of God. Wondering when will this disease disappear? How many lives will be lost? Why is there such inequity in it? So many questions. God, why don't you just solve our problems?

I struggle with that. I notice it coming up in my thoughts. God, why don't you just solve our problems? We've got so many. And why do we have all these problems? We seem to get lost in the worries of our lives. People get killed. We have inequity. We have prejudice. Then we have other problems that are also looming large, yet their effects are not as immediate. Things like climate change. Economic turmoil, which may be affecting us immediately. International tensions. The divisions that we struggle with as we try to find a way forward together. I ask the question, “How long, O God? How long do we suffer through these?” As I reflect on this, I often wonder if God were to show us the way to solve our problems, would we hear God? Would we accept what God has given us?

As Jesus was wandering through the countryside in Judea, he noticed that the people seemed harassed and helpless. I was taken by that description. The people were harassed and helpless. I don't know that most of us think of ourselves as harassed and helpless most of the time, at least before this virus and isolation came upon us. It might have felt overly busy or we might have wondered how we would get something done. Some of us might have had true experiences of helplessness—a health crisis, an economic crisis. But oftentimes we don't, and don't want to think of ourselves as harassed and helpless.

Generally, I think we want to believe that we can tackle the problems, solve them, use our energy to make it all happen. We can be effective and do something that will change and solve things. As we do that, we think that then we can get back to enjoying our lives. At least, I wonder if that has often been the case. Sometimes I wonder if this

disease doesn't make me feel a little harassed and helpless. I simply can't do all the things I used to do. When should I wear a mask and when should I not? How careful do I need to be? How much should I isolate? I'm helpless to know when the virus might show up and where it might be, how careful I need to be.

Then, there are the protests. It certainly brings some recognition again of how much privilege I have as a white person, particularly as a white male. I wonder how much a part of the problem I am. I recognize that there are a lot of people who do feel harassed and helpless, crying out for change. Crying out for more equity. Crying out for a right to live life without fear of being killed by the very ones who are put in place to protect. Certainly, it moves me to think about how I need to examine my relationship with people of color, particularly. I recognize it's a journey I need to take.

Perhaps both of these, the disease and the protests, have brought up in me a recognition of my own helplessness. I'm not in complete control of my life, nor are we. I think about what it means to accept we have a journey to make, and that there are things in our lives we need to change.

I wonder if we don't have a similar issue with God. We have to accept that we need to be forgiven in order to be shown grace and to change. I know I'm a little change resistant. I want to be able to just relax. I want to be able to just live my life. I don't want to think that I'm somehow doing something that's not right, that's wrong. I don't want to think that I might be complicit in some kind of evil. It is, I think, the whole idea that we need to be forgiven that begins with accepting we need forgiveness. I think oftentimes we will recognize certain areas of our lives. I think about how for me it is important to come in prayer, asking God for mercy. It is recognizing that need for mercy that is truly important, because Jesus looked on the harassed and helpless and had compassion for them. It is when we accept our need that we can receive Jesus' compassion. We have access to grace, and that grace will change us.

The passage from Romans helps us recognize how accepting that grace and beginning to trust in Jesus and have faith in him changes us. It seems to help us see that suffering. It isn't generic suffering. We are not simply accepting others' suffering as okay. This is accepting our own experience of suffering due to doing what is good and right. Accepting that "suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." That's what Paul said. Yet it is hard to step into that place of accepting that I might have some struggles, some hard feelings if I do what is right. So it's a continual effort to do so, and to work at it, and yet, if we allow God's Holy Spirit to pour God's love into our hearts, we will have this way of getting there. We will go through suffering, perhaps We will need endurance. But it leads to character and hope.

We know people whose character we recognize because we know what they have been through. They have shown their character. Think of somebody in your life who

has done what is right, and you feel like they have suffered for it. You recognize their character. And character produces hope.

If we think about what Jesus is saying when he is telling his disciples to go out, he's telling them to go and bring peace into other people's houses. Help them hear the Good News and recognize that the kingdom of God is near. He's sending them. I wonder how easy it is to accept the peace another brings to us. Accept that God's grace is something we need. And really hearing that God's kingdom is near.

So often I see so much going on in the world around me, I struggle with feeling that God's kingdom is near. I struggle with having any peace, because I have all these feelings about the things going on. I have feelings of concern for people. I worry about the future. I have concern for those on the front lines and the grief over the loss of life. I feel disheartened over rifts in our society and the uncertainty about what that's going to mean and how we're going to move forward together.

How do I accept the peace that God might bring into my house? How do I hear from those who are with me or come to us? How do we open our hearts and our minds, our ears and our eyes to the peace God can bring into our lives? It's one of those changes I think is being talked about as Jesus wants to address the harassed and helpless and to bring peace into their lives, into our lives. For as we are harassed and helpless, as we recognize our own struggles and our own inability to solve it all, we need the very peace of God that can be brought into our lives by those who come to us. We need help remembering and recognizing the Good News that God's kingdom *is* near. In spite of all that's going on in the world around us, God is with us. God is near. God's kingdom is not far off.

I sometimes wonder if that is part of our problem today. I wonder if we have decided the kingdom of God is not near. We have forgotten about God and how God is with us, how God walks among us, and how God's Spirit is available to be poured into our hearts so we might know the love of God and be able to do what is right and might walk through suffering and have endurance, build character, and sustain hope. Can we recognize that God is near?

I'll tell you; sometimes I have a hard time with the idea that God is near, particularly right now when there seems to be so much vitriol in our world, such strong divisions where it's hard to even have those conversations we need to have. And yet, God's kingdom is near. We can allow that smokescreen of division to make us think that it's not. I don't know how to convince anyone that it is. I just hear this Good News. I recognize the presence of the Spirit with us.

I do also notice that there are a lot of people trying to do good—caring for their neighbors, giving to food banks, supporting the people who are in need, worrying about the lives of others, particularly of people who have been the subject of such prejudice and racism. I think there are glimmers that God's kingdom is nearer than we might expect. It is for us to remember that God's kingdom is near. To accept the peace that

God will bring us. The interesting thing about that is that in doing so, it's not so that we can go home and relax. It's rather to find that we now become those disciples who Jesus is talking to, who are sent to bring peace in the midst of oppression, peace in the midst of struggle, peace in the midst of strife, peace in the midst of worry. There's that incredible line about all the things that Jesus is asking his disciples to do. It's all about healing and bringing people to life.

We are invited to do that. We are invited to open ourselves to the peace God brings us so we might go to bring peace in the midst of our time, our place, our world. And if that brings suffering for doing what is right, then Paul tells us it will create endurance, and endurance creates character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint because God's love is poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit.

Yes, we come with questions for God. I don't have all the answers, but I do think God is walking with us, inviting us to hear, inviting us to see, inviting us to care, inviting us into the healing and not into the strife, not into violence, not into dismissal, but into listening and loving and into wrapping our arms (figuratively right now) around each other, trying to find out how we can go forward together because we have a God that is with us, who loves us, who is the foundation of our peace, who has given us a grace that we recognize we need because we all experience being harassed and helpless.

We may try not to believe it, and yet somehow it feels that in all of us there is that time of recognition that the human experience too often is an attempt to deny that very sense of being harassed and helpless. And in acknowledging that experience, we are invited to accept the grace of Christ and through that grace, the love of God poured into our hearts in the Holy Spirit that we might be changed, to accept peace that is brought to us, to recognize that God's kingdom is near, and to find we are sent to bring peace in the midst of our time. God bless. Amen.