

Wesley United Methodist Church Rev. Beverly E Stenmark
November 17, 2019
Title: God's Got This
Scripture: 2 Thessalonians 2:13-17
Luke 20:27-38

Yesterday's Upper Room Devotional had a story written by a man currently living in Texas. He described a time, a few months after his graduation from high school when his native country was in a genocide that killed approximately 800,000 people including his family members. He wrote, "This unexpected, barbaric event left me parentless, homeless, and penniless. I began to wonder where my God had been when these horrible things were happening. I found myself in a state of confusion, not knowing where and how to move forward in life."

He describes sitting under a tree and praying to God for guidance and says he felt paralyzed with fear and grief. In the devotional he references Psalm 18:6 (NIV) "In my distress I called to the Lord; I cried to my God for help. From his temple he heard my voice; my cry came before him, into his ears."

He concludes his devotional with this testimony, "Sometimes we face challenges beyond our control. Psalm 18:6 reminds us that when we call on the Lord for help in times of distress, God will hear our prayers. Knowing that God hears our cries and is with us every step we take gave me strength in the darkest hours of my life. We can trust that regardless of what life throws at us, God hears our prayers and will guide our steps."ⁱ

We don't always know how it is that God hears our prayers and guides our steps. There are some who believe that God controls or causes everything that happens in the world – and in our individual lives. For some

this is very comforting. Early in my ministry, an 8-year-old boy died suddenly. His grandfather, who was a man of deep faith told me that he knew why his grandson died. He said it was because “God needed him more than we do.”

I’m glad that this grandfather had a way of dealing with his grandson’s death that helped him cope with it and as his pastor I did not challenge what he found to be so helpful. A couple of years later, we were able to have some other discussion around that, but I would never take away the theology that he found so helpful at the time.

I, on the other hand, did not, and do not find that theology helpful. I do not believe that God took the child. I do believe that when this child died, God received him into God’s loving arms. I do believe that God was present with the child and his mother and with all of us who were grieving. I believe that God wept with us that day and I believe that God walked with his family, and all of us every step of the way. I believe that God shone a light into the terrible darkness and that God was the light that helped us find our way through the days, weeks, months, and years ahead.

I don’t know why the child died. I know that there was a solid medical explanation for why he stopped breathing and his heart stopped beating. But beyond the scientific explanation, why he died right then, or why he died at all, is beyond my understanding. There are many many things that happen in life that I can’t even begin to understand. I don’t even know if his grandfather’s explanation and faith declaration that God needed him more than his family did is true. It was comforting to his grandfather. It is not comforting to me. I have often said that when I get to heaven, God better have lots of time available, because I have a very long list of questions that I want answered.

Years ago, I read that “It’s absurd to apologize for mystery.” I have a vague idea of where I read it, and I think it had something to do with trying to explain the Trinity. However, it is something that I have always held onto. “It’s absurd to apologize for mystery.” There are so many things that we do not understand and probably never will.

That doesn’t mean, however, that we throw up our hands in frustration or hopelessness. It doesn’t mean that we stop asking the questions. One of my seminary professors was asked about something having to do with evil. His response was, “I don’t know.” The person questioning him became angry and said that he was a professor of theology, he should know the answer. Jerry’s response was that he had studied long and hard; he had thought about it and prayed about it; he had struggled with the question and he had earned the right to say, “I don’t know.”ⁱⁱ I appreciated his answer and his certainty that it was okay to not know.

However, it doesn’t end with “I don’t know”. There are many things that we do know, many things that we can affirm, experiences to which we can testify that mean that “I don’t know” is not the end. “It’s absurd to apologize for mystery” is not a cop-out.

Both of our Scriptures today deal with a time when people wanted specific answers; when they were trying to make sense of something that they were not really prepared or able to understand. They represent a time of stress, conflict, and challenge for Jesus’ followers.

This chapter in Luke is filled with people challenging Jesus. It takes place during what we call Holy Week and begins with the “chief priests, legal experts, and elders” or Pharisees challenging Jesus’ authority to teach, preach, and do the things he has been doing.

In Jesus' time the Pharisees and Sadducees were important but different religious sects in Judaism. Just as today, there are many different opinions about the "right" answer – so there were in Jesus' time.

"Religiously, the Sadducees were more conservative in one doctrinal area: they insisted on a literal interpretation of the text of Scripture; the Pharisees, on the other hand, gave oral tradition equal authority to the written Word of God. If the Sadducees couldn't find a command in Tanakh (scripture), they dismissed it as manmade."ⁱⁱⁱ

One important place this played out was in the belief of what happened when someone died. The Pharisees believed in a resurrection, but the Sadducees believed that there was no afterlife. They were, however, united in their opposition to Jesus and now it was the Sadducees turn to challenge Jesus and, quite frankly, to try to make him look foolish.

They began by raising the question of the Mosaic law of what was called "levirate marriage." Because the Sadducees did not believe in any kind of afterlife, they believed that a person – or specifically a man – lived on only through his children. The rule of levirate marriage and inheritance was that if a man died without having produced a male heir, his brother was expected to marry his widow. The first male child born of their marriage belonged to the deceased brother and inherited what had belonged to the man. Subsequent children of the marriage belonged to the current husband and were his heirs.

The Sadducees tried to trap Jesus by concocting a ridiculous scenario to show that Resurrection as a concept is ludicrous.^{iv} They made up a story about seven brothers. The first one married a woman and died without producing a male child. In accordance with the law, his wife married the next brother who also died childless. This continued through all seven

brothers – all of whom died without any children. To prove how ridiculous they thought resurrection was, they asked, “In the resurrection whose wife will she be? All seven were married to her.”

They were using Moses’ law to state their question and arguing that **if** there were a resurrection, the same laws would apply, and the woman would have seven husbands. Because this life is all we know, they assumed that if there were such a thing as an afterlife, it would be much the same as this life – with marrying and children.

There just wasn’t any good way to answer that question. But Jesus was the master of strange questions. He saw the question for what it was and used it as a teaching opportunity. Essentially, he said, “You’re comparing apples and oranges. You’re missing the point.” Since the Sadducees used Moses as the basis of their question, Jesus showed that he could speak their language as well. He used Moses to make his argument.

And then came the most important line – one that is easily overlooked – but that is one of the most radical statements in the whole gospel account. God is not the God of the dead, but is God of the living, because to God – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, all who have lived – are still alive.

Jesus believed, as the Pharisees did, that these ancestors, although no longer walking the earth with us, were already enjoying the blessings of God’s presence. Jesus made it clear that heaven or eternal life, or whatever we choose to call it is different than life here on earth.

Many have used the illustration of a caterpillar becoming a butterfly to try to explain how we are changed as we move from death to eternal life. A caterpillar seeing a butterfly would not be able to understand that this butterfly once crawled among them as a caterpillar. Any attempt we make

to explain these mysteries will fall short of a full explanation. These wonderful attempts are ways that we try to make sense of what we cannot yet fully understand.

What we can understand, however, is that God's got it. When Jesus was preparing to leave his disciples, they wanted to know how they would manage without him, without his guidance, without his presence. Jesus promised them that he would send "the comforter" the Holy Spirit who would abide with them, who would guide them, be present with them, show them the way. This is how I understand that God chooses to work. This is how I have experienced the presence of God in my life and in the lives of others.

About 20 years after Jesus' death and resurrection, the apostle Paul, wrote a letter to the followers of Jesus living in Thessalonica. In the early days after Jesus' death and resurrection, the church expected Jesus to return very soon. The believers in Thessalonica were experiencing a lot of pressure because of their beliefs and they were worried about other believers who were starting to die before Jesus returned. They wanted to know what would happen to them. Some also believed that if Jesus was coming back soon, there was no reason for them to work. Paul wrote to them to assure them and to encourage them to live a life that was consistent with the virtues and the teachings of Jesus.

Sometime later, at least 10 years, maybe longer, another letter was written to the Thessalonians. This letter, which we heard a small portion of earlier, focused on the concern that some had that Jesus had already returned and they had missed it. They were anxious and afraid and were still being persecuted for their beliefs.

Paul, or one of his followers, who wrote this letter encourages them to hold firm to the traditions and the beliefs they were given. Their faithfulness and good works are celebrated, and the plea is that they will continue in this way doing good works that honor Christ.

Essentially, I think the message again is, “I know things don’t make sense right now. I know you want answers but the questions who are asking are not helpful.” Hold fast to the truth you already know. Don’t be swayed by inflammatory ideas. Don’t be misled by people who try to divert your attention.

This is not about working harder, but about allowing the Spirit to abide with them – and with us - and transforming their hearts – and ours – in love. There were many things that the people in Thessalonica did not understand – and that’s okay. There were things that Paul and the other apostles did not understand – and that’s okay. There are things that pastors and evangelists and all of us do not understand – and that’s okay.

The message for us today was summed up well on the United Methodist Church’s Board of Discipleship website in some thoughts for this passage. They said it better than I can, so I share these words with you.

“When we stumble over questions of how this world folds into the next one, our answer is ‘God’s got this.’ Even when we don’t understand death or life – ‘God’s got this.’ Even when our hearts break and our vision is cloudy – ‘God’s got this.’ Even when it seems like everything is broken and violence rules the day and division is the mode of this life, ‘God’s got this.’ The Spirit abides and we are invited to live differently, to value differently, to hope unreservedly, and to praise constantly. Because God’s got this.”^v

ⁱ The Upper Room Daily Devotional, Nov. 16, 2019

ⁱⁱ My recollection is that it was Jerry Handspicker who described this at Andover Newton, but I cannot be sure.

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.gotquestions.org/Sadducees-Pharisees.html>

^{iv} www.gbod.org/worship "The Spirit Abides" preaching notes for Nov. 10th.

^v www.gbod.org/worship Notes for Nov. 10th The Spirit Abides.