

His Wonders to Perform: A Sermon About Providence

Psalm 131

Isaiah 49:8-16

1 Corinthinans 4:1-5

Matthew 6:24-34



“Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.” (Matt. 6:34). That is from this morning’s gospel reading. I begin this sermon with a true confession. No preacher likes to preach on lectionary readings that betray his own special weakness. When I saw that this morning’s lectionary contained the verse I just read to you, I was seriously tempted to preach on a different text. As a small child, I was labeled early on as a worry wart. My report cards had comments like: “Bill is a good student, but he is too serious for a third grader.” Some time during my undergraduate years, I graduated from worry to cynicism, and thought of myself as an “angry young man.” You grow out of that when you reach a certain age, and you realize that people don’t find “crotchety old men” to be nearly as fascinating as “angry young men.” If I have a patron saint, it would likely be Eeyore. If there were a beatitude for people like me, it would read: “Blessed are the pessimists; for they won’t be disappointed.”

So I confess that when I preach this sermon, I am not

preaching it as someone who practices what I preach very well. But sometimes preachers need to preach to themselves as well as their audience.

Two of this morning's lectionary readings are addressed to people who are anxious in the face of troubling circumstances. The Isaiah reading is addressed to a people who have returned from captivity in Babylon, only now to discover that the promised hope for deliverance is not quite what they expected. The prophet expresses the words of their dejection: "I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity." "Zion said, 'The LORD has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me.'" (Isaiah 49:4,14).

The gospel reading from Matthew is addressed to the disciples of Jesus, and warns against anxiety, specifically against worries about the day to day things that keep us awake in the middle of the night. Jesus says: "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?" (Matt. 6:25). Positively, Jesus assures us that if we seek the one thing that is important, we will not have to worry about these other things: "But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." (Matt. 6: 33).

The key theological theme of both passages is what theologians call the doctrine of providence. Providence is the answer to the question, "Where is God?" We ask this question because, like Israel in the Isaiah passage, we sometimes find ourselves in situations that cause us to think that God has forgotten us. At some point in our lives, we all find ourselves at a place where our hopes are dashed, where nothing we try works, and the future seems dark, and we ask ourselves questions like "Why go on anymore?" If you spend any time at all getting to know people on more than a superficial level, you will discover that most people carry tremendous burdens, that

everyone has experienced at some point in their life a kind of pain that makes you wonder how people can continue to put one foot in front of another.

Providence is also at stake when we get so distracted with worry or getting on with life that we forget to even ask the question "Where is God?" Some people just give up in despair, but most of us learn to cope with the uncertainties of life, and we do it in the way that Jesus warns against in Matthew's gospel. We get busy. Busyness is an attempt to forestall the uncertainties of the future by trying to cover every possible contingency. Because we have experienced bad things in life, we try to take steps to guarantee that no bad thing can ever happen to us again.

The basic question behind the doctrine of providence is the question about the goodness of God. When bad things happen to us, we believe that God has abandoned us because we assume that if God were good, he would be there for us. So we ask, "Where is God?"

But we also get involved in worry and busyness because, at bottom, we doubt that God is good, or perhaps God is good, but he is just not in control of the world we live in. Worry and busyness are our attempts to control a world that, if we're honest, we believe that God does not control. We recognize our own limitations, our own inadequacy, and we do not have confidence that God is concerned for our good. So we attempt to compensate for our finitude by increasing the amount of the world we can control. We cannot control everything, but we can control some things. We also attempt to control others in our attempts to make things come out right. And, of course, they resent our trying to control them, so they, in turn, try to control us. It becomes a never ending cycle of control or be controlled. If God cannot be trusted to take care of providence, we will do the job.

What I find interesting in both the passage in Isaiah and in

Jesus' admonitions in the Sermon on the Mount is the counter strategy that both adopt in response to the two original strategies of forgetting about providence. One might expect a good scolding! "Don't you know that despair and obsessive control are denials of God's providence? Snap out of it! God is in control, and if you don't believe it, how about a lightning bolt to get your attention?!"

But that is not what the prophet and Jesus do. Instead, like a parent who distracts a child from bad behavior by turning her attention to something else, Jesus and Isaiah turn the attention of those who are anxious away from what is worrying us by reminding us of some basic facts about the world we live in, and who is in charge of that world. If worry is caused by focusing one's attentions on the wrong thing, then the response is to focus on the right thing. In so doing, the prophet and Jesus spell out the essentials of the doctrine of providence.

So, first, the doctrine of providence draws a connection between the goodness of God and a number of other doctrines: first, creation, but also covenant, and, we need to add, redemption and eschatology as well.



What about creation? Creation is crucial to providence because creation says that God is a good God, and he does not give up on the world he has made. The world is good because the God who has created it is good, but the world is not God, and we are not God. So Jesus reminds his listeners: "Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?" (Matt. 6:26). Jesus

reminds us that the God who created the world cares about it, and cares about us, and this loving God is quite capable of taking care of us and our world, and that is his job, not ours. We bang our heads against the reality of the universe God has created because we forget that.

The second aspect of providence is covenant. In the passage from Isaiah, the prophet reminds Israel of what God has already done for them. The God who created Israel as a nation, who brought Israel out of slavery in Egypt, and who has now, once again, brought Israel in a new Exodus out of exile to return once more to the Promised Land, has not forgotten his covenant people. God speaks through his prophet:

Thus says the LORD:

“In a time of favor I have answered you;
in a day of salvation I have helped you;
I will keep you and give you
as a covenant to the people,
to establish the land,
to apportion the desolate heritages,
saying to the prisoners, ‘Come out,’
to those who are in darkness, ‘Appear.’ ” (Is. 49:8-9).

God responds to Israel’s complaint that he has forgotten his people, with the reminder that it is not God, but Israel who seems to have a short memory:

“Can a woman forget her nursing child,
that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb?
Even these may forget,
yet I will not forget you.” (Is. 49: 15).

There is a third aspect to the doctrine of providence that is not mentioned in this morning’s lectionary readings, but which is absolutely essential, and that is the cross. If we were to read this morning’s readings without reading the rest of Isaiah, or the rest of Matthew, we might assume that

providence meant something like the theology that lies behind the "prosperity gospel." It is God's job to take care of our needs, and if we do not have everything we want, this must mean either that God has forgotten us, or else that we don't have enough faith. But Matthew's gospel is not only the gospel that records Jesus' words about God caring for the lilies of the field and the birds of the air. Matthew's gospel is the gospel that records that those who conspired to put Jesus to death, mocked him at his crucifixion with the challenge, "Let him come down from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him." (Matt. 27:42-43). Matthew's gospel records that the crucified Jesus cried out with a loud voice, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46).

The prophet who writes in Isaiah that God has not forgotten his people also records only four chapters later about the Suffering Servant: "He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief . . . he was wounded for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities." (Is. 53:3,5). The cross is also essential to providence. The Jesus who preached the Sermon on the Mount is the same Jesus who died on the cross, who bore our iniquities, who was forsaken by God. He is the Servant who was wounded for our transgressions.

To be a follower of Jesus means that the cross is unavoidable. The same Jesus who speaks of the birds of the air and the lilies of the field in the Sermon on the Mount begins the sermon with beatitudes that say things like "Blessed are those who mourn." (Matt. 5:4).

Of course, the cross is not complete without the resurrection. But cross and resurrection belong together. What cross and resurrection say together is not that suffering and evil are not real, nor that followers of Jesus should not expect suffering. What cross and resurrection say together is that God's way of dealing with suffering and evil is not to

overcome them by brute force, but to undergo the most horrible suffering and evil that this world has to offer and to overcome it from within. When God came to his creation in the person of his Son Jesus Christ, our response was to attempt to control the God of providence by putting him to death on a cross. But resurrection shows not only that God can take the worst that we can throw at him, but that he can bring good even out of that worst! That is how God defeated evil in the cross, and that is how God works in our own lives. The crucified God cannot be controlled. He is in control.

So God's goodness in providence does not mean that there is no suffering or evil, but that worry and anxiety do not have the last word. As Paul says in Rom. 8:28, "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good." And we also know from the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount that God extends the goodness of his providence even to those of us who fail to appreciate it. For God sends his rain on the just and the unjust alike (Matt. 5:45).

That worry and anxiety do not have the last word finally means that there can be no talk about providence without also talking about eschatology. The beatitudes tell us that those who mourn are blessed not because they mourn, but because they will be comforted. The poor in spirit are blessed because they will inherit God's kingdom (Matt. 5:3-4).

It has long been fashionable for those who think they can get along without God's providence to dismiss eschatology as "pie in the sky by and by." Karl Marx said notoriously that religion is the opiate of the people. But what secularists offer in exchange for providence is something called progress, and it does not take much of a genius to realize that progress is just providence without God. And after 400 years of the failed promises of secularism, it is not naïve to develop some cynicism about the cynicism of the cynics. One can wait just so long for the revolution of the proletariat to bring in a classless society or for the invisible hand of the market to

produce the rising tide that will lift all boats or for natural selection and the survival of the fittest to produce a new Nietzschean Superman before one realizes that at least with providence there is someone in charge. A mindless providence really is no providence. Even worse, a mindless providence is a providence without love. The God of the Bible loves his creation, he has plans for it, he has redeemed it, he has promised never to abandon it, and he will bring it to completion. In the words of Julian of Norwich, "All shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well." (*Revelations of Divine Love*, 13.27)

Where does that leave us now, in this time between the times, the time between God's taking all that we could throw at him on the cross, and the time when Jesus returns, when, as Julian said, "All manner of things shall be well"? In wrapping up, I have just a few points of advice, from a chronic worrier who keeps himself way too busy trying to control providence, to a chapel of seminarians and faculty whom I suspect probably do the same thing as well, and all too often. What does providence mean for us, here and now?

First, I would remind everyone here of something we already know: "It's not about you!" But I would modify that familiar slogan just a bit. "It's not about you, but God has a plan, and that plan does include you." At the same time, in most cases, God is not going to tell us straight out what part we play in his plan, and it is not our job to know. Our job is to be faithful to what we do know. Because we don't know what our part is in God's providence, it is not our job to second guess, and to try to control providence. Providence is God's job, not ours. And that is actually a good thing. Isn't it a relief to know that running the universe is not our responsibility? Let someone who knows how take care of that!

Second, tempting as it might be, it is not our job to play providence with other people's lives. Most of us know exactly how we would run the world if we were God, and we especially

know about the parts of other people's lives that need fixing, and we're more than glad to help God out here. But again, providence is God's job, not ours. We cannot change other people, and it is not our job to try.

Third, at the same time that we need to remember that we cannot control providence, we also need to remind ourselves that, try as we might, we ourselves cannot get outside God's providence. We cannot mess up our own lives so badly that God's providence is thwarted. It is so easy to think that our sins and our failures can make such a mess of life that not even God can pick up the pieces. But if the God who gave himself to us in Jesus can handle the cross, then the God who raised Jesus from the dead can handle even your or my own worst failures, catastrophes, and, yes, even sins. We do not need to worry about whether or not we have done the right thing, or whether we have taken the right path. God can always pick up our pieces. As one of my favorite writers, the Dominican Simon Tugwell has put it, "God's providence means that *wherever* we have got to, *whatever* we have done, that is precisely where the road to heaven begins."¹

And that leads us to end at the same place where Isaiah and Jesus began. The problem with worry is that it focuses our attention on the wrong things. Isaiah and Jesus remind us to look to the right thing instead. In the words of Jesus, "Seek first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." (Matt.6:33). We who are descendants of the Reformation love to speak of justification by faith. Faith can be translated "belief," but it can also be translated "trust." Might I suggest that "justification by trust" is the way to salvation that saves us not only from confidence in our own good works, but also from the busyness and worry that are symptoms of our belief that ultimately it is our job to make things turn out right, to take providence into our own hands. If we will give up on trying to run the world for God, perhaps we can learn once again to trust in the

God who is big enough to create the world, to redeem it, and who has promised that in the end, he will make it turn out right. Justification by trust means that our hope is not in our own ability to make things turn out right, but that we can trust in the God who is big enough to get the job done. Unlike us, he not only cares for us, but he knows what really is good for us. And also, unlike us, he never gets tired or discouraged or worried. He never gives up, and, in the end, he will get the job done right.

1 *Prayer: Living With God* (Springfield: Templegate Publishers, 1975), 53.