

PROVIDENCE AND PANDEMIC

Scripture Reading: Luke 13:1-5

You know the old joke: a flood comes and rises to cover the floor of a man's house. A Humvee pulls up and the National Guardsman says to the man, "*Jump in – a flood's coming!*" The man waves him off with, "*I know that God will save me.*"

The water rises to cover the first floor of the man's house, so he scrambles up to the second floor. A boat comes motoring by and the Sheriff says to him, "*Jump in – the flood's getting worse.*" Again, the man declines: "*I know that God will save me.*"

Now the water rises so high that the man has to climb up onto the roof. A helicopter comes flying over and the pilot says to the man, "*Jump in – this is your last chance!*" "*I know that God will save me,*" the man says, waving off the helicopter.

The water rises higher so that the man is overwhelmed, drowns, and dies. When he arrives in heaven, he marches up to God and says, "*I thought you were going to save me!*" God says, "*What do you want? I sent you a Humvee, a boat, and a helicopter.*"

That familiar old joke is about God's **providence**, the how, what, when and why of God's activity in our creation, in our history, and in our lives. In this time of Pandemic, it's natural for us to echo the words of the Psalmist:

*How long, O Lord? Will you
Forget us forever?
How long will you hide your
Face from us? (Psalm 13:1)*

It's understandable that this time afflicts us with difficult doubts and a shaken faith. But such times are not new to the people of faith; again and again in our scriptures, our spiritual ancestors dealt with pestilence and war, injustice and fear. And they turned to providence, their understanding of how God was acting even in the midst of those difficult times, to bring them comfort and hope.

So, this morning I want to look at the different ways that our scriptures talk about God's providence and what that mean for us and our faith as we live through this time of Pandemic. I'm going to talk about four approaches that are not meant to be mutually exclusive.

The first way of understanding God's providence is thinking of God as Creator and Keeper of the Covenant. This is the God who set up the universe with a moral coherence, a natural order in which the good prosper and the evil are punished. This was the understanding of the Deists, including many of our nation's founders, who thought of God as a kind of master watchmaker who established the mechanism and then let it run on its own.

God is an impersonal force, in this understanding, with the covenant standing as a moral ordering that is non-negotiable. You certainly hear this as the giving of the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy concludes with:



“See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord... by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments... then you shall live and become numerous... But if your heart turns away and you do not hear... I declare to you today that you shall perish...” (Deuteronomy 30:15-17).

Is there an order in Creation, a Covenant in our human relations that cannot be breached without dire and punitive consequences? Here’s a good, brief, and fictional example of such covenantal thinking from the movie *Jurassic Park*:

Jeff Goldblum speech in *Jurassic Park*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dEOxq7aVKh4>

First, way to go Laura Dern for calling them on their exclusively male language! More to the point, Jeff Goldblum’s character is expressing the dangers of covenantal violation. The point of the whole movie is that scientific and commercial arrogance doesn’t take into account a universe with a moral ordering that bites back if violated – literally bites back!

What does this have to do with Pandemic? Well, perhaps you too have read that Covid-19, like SARS, might have originated in a bat virus crossing over to humans. That crossing over might have to do with specific exploitation of these wild bats for commercial use or it might simply have to do with the habitat destruction that has forced them into closer interactions with humans. Did you know that 75% of new infectious human diseases originate in animals, many of whom have been forced from their habitat and brought unnaturally into close proximity with humans?

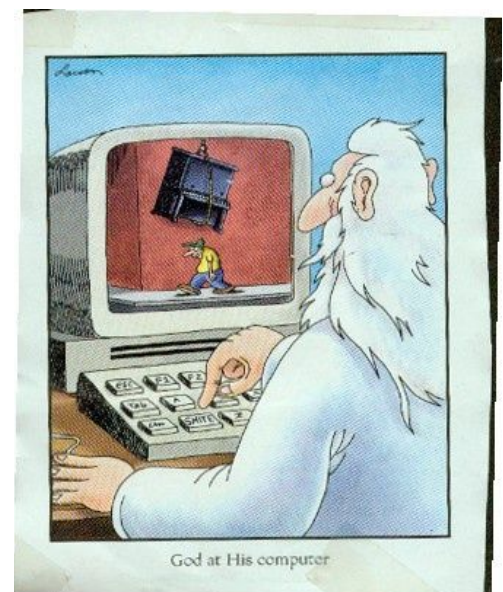
So, you tell me – might the pandemic be teaching us that we need to be honoring our covenant with creation? Is God acting in Pandemic as Creator and Keeper of the Covenant?

As I said, this is a rather impersonal way of understanding God’s activity in the world. There is a more personal way of seeing it. Here’s one of my favorite Gary Larson cartoons from “The Far Side”:

Gary Larson cartoon: *God at His Computer*

God’s finger is personally poised over the “smite” button as you and I schlep our way through life. That’s a humorous way of depicting another approach to providence: God as Righteous Intervener.

In this approach, we are given an activist God who wields force in enact a specific purpose at a specific moment in history. The best Biblical example is found in the Plagues that smite Egypt in the book of Exodus. God’s purpose is the liberation of the Hebrew people, and God uses force to achieve that specific purpose. That’s also the understanding in the old joke that I started this with: God sent a Humvee, boat, and helicopter to rescue a specific man from a specific flood.



I bet that you can spot the dangers of this approach. Just two days after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Rev. Jerry Falwell appeared on Rev. Pat Robertson's *700 Club* and the two of them engaged in some theologizing about God's providence that nearly all of us will find truly painful:

Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson blame Pagans, secularists, Gays and Lesbians, ACLU, pro-choice for provoking God to commit 9/11
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kMkBgA9_oQ4

The incredible irony of their dialogue is that Falwell and Robertson are agreeing with the fundamentalist reasoning of the terrorists: the deaths brought about by the attacks are God's judgment on America and on its rising secularism.

Many of us are old enough to remember when haters masquerading as Christians proclaimed that AIDS was God's judgment on homosexuals. We've heard similar voices declaring Covid-19 as divine punishment, most prominently through non-state violent groups like the jihadist Isis. They see the rising rates of infection and death as divine retribution against the west. Indian scholar Animish Roul also observes that *"some of the violent groups have adopted or are adhering to health guidelines issued by the World Health Organization (WHO) or The Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), even as they continue intense criticisms... (of) western science and knowledge."* Apparently, the terrorists' confidence in God's providence only goes so far.

This kind of hypocrisy seems inherent to the understanding of providence that God is Righteous Intervener. But a more serious example of this approach can be seen in author Peter Block's comment: *"The virus is God's way of ending consumerism; it is the end of the narrative of globalism."*

The limitations of an interventionist approach to providence led to the book of Job and its third approach, God as Holy Mystery. Here is God speaking to poor, innocent, suffering Job out of the whirlwind:

*'Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?
Tell me, if you have understanding.
Who determined its measurements—surely you know! (Job 38:1)*

God's actions and whatever purposes God may have are simply beyond us; that's the final conclusion of the book of Job. We must simply stand in awe and wonder before the holy mystery that is God. Sometimes this approach is described as God having a plan, something bigger than we can grasp, more intricate than we can understand.

Norman Maclean wrote his wonderful novella *A River Runs Through It* based on his own life. It's the story of two brothers who have distinctly different natures and destinies. It's also about Maclean's struggles to understand if there was a divine hand and purpose guiding it all. Here, at the end of the movie version, director Robert Redford quotes from the ending of the book as we watch Norman Maclean himself flyfishing in the Big Blackfoot River in Montana:

Ending of A River Runs Through It

There is peace here, isn't there, for those of us struggling to find moments of beauty and grace in the midst of Pandemic. We walk in the woods, we reach out to a friend, we appreciate the few

loved ones who share our bubble and are reassured that God is still there, a Holy Mystery that cannot be erased by pandemic and fear and doubt.

Finally, I want to talk about Jesus and the radical way in which he talked about providence: **God as Immanuel**, the one who is always with us.

Our Gospel Reading from Luke this morning brings us some religious busybody types rushing up to Jesus with the latest lurid outrages: first, Pilate had some Jews butchered even as they were in the temple offering sacrifices to God – gunned down in worship would be a modern equivalent; and second, eighteen seemingly random people were randomly killed by the random collapse of a tower in Siloam, an area of Jerusalem. *“Were they bad people, Jesus,”* they demand, *“that God would kill them like that?”* Jesus answers them unequivocally: **No**. Then he tries to instill some humility and reality in those busybodies by reminding them that they are just as human and vulnerable as those who died.

I believe Jesus is repudiating a righteous interventionist understanding of God here. In his teaching and living and dying he also seems to go beyond covenant or mystery to embody a God in profound solidarity with you and me, with our common humanity, our everyday lives, and inbreaking of the kin-dom of God.

This is not a God who rules and controls from above but a God who walks alongside, a God **Immanuel**. Talk of God’s omnipotence or omniscience give way to Jesus’ message of God’s omnipresent love.

John Steinbeck’s great American novel, the Grapes of Wrath, shows the plight of depression era dustbowl farmers, oppressed and abused, fighting for justice and struggling for survival. At the end of the movie version, as Tom Joad is leaving his family to carry on the fight for justice, he talks with his mother:

Tom Joad speech from Grapes of Wrath “I’ll be there...”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ERif97cdMII>

This morning, I want to challenge you to see the God Immanuel in this time of Pandemic. For I believe this:

- God is with the grocery stocker and check-out clerk as they meet our essential need for food;
- God is with the small business owner who wonders how long they can stay open if things continue this way;
- God is with those who live in chronic pain or physical challenge because they have had to delay their medical treatments as our hospitals and health care providers are overwhelmed;
- God is with the employer who stays up late at night worrying about how they can do right by their employees and their families;

- God is with the nurses and doctors and CNA's and receptionists and custodians who change their clothes in the garage after work and shower before greeting their family so that the risk might be just theirs not their families to do the life-saving work they do;
- God is with the scientist, the researcher, the lab tech, and the thousands of volunteers who are doing their all to find a life-saving vaccine for this deadly disease;
- God is with the student who struggles to learn in ways that are hard for them and the teacher who has worked tirelessly to find new ways to share their knowledge and love of learning;
- God is with children, friends, and partner of the isolated hospital patient as they try to communicate their love and care through facetime or skype;
- God is with leaders who listen and learn and ask not what's in it for them but how we can all be in this together and serve the common good;
- God is with the three year old who has learned how to wear a mask, the teenager who really does practice social distancing, the twenty-something who has learned anew their grade school lesson on how to wash their hands, the parent feverishly trying to balance, work, home-schooling, and the care of their youngest ones, and the grandparent who cares for their health by staying in a bubble that sometimes feels like it's bursting in their heart – all because they are following Jesus' call to love their neighbor.

This is the God Immanuel, the one revealed to us so profoundly by Jesus, who suffers alongside, who serves alongside, who is evident even in Pandemic, even and especially in those most difficult times in our lives and in our history. This is the one who is right beside us, day by day, offering care, comfort, courage, and hope.

Look around your life this week. I pray you will see God present in so many places: God Immanuel, God-With-Us.

Amen.

Sermon preached by Reverend Steve Savides at First Congregational United Church of Christ, Appleton, Wisconsin
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