

The Presence of God
Co-Pastor Susanne Guenther Loewen
July 26, 2020

Scripture: Psalm 105:1-11, 45b; Romans 8:26-39

Hymns: StS 121 – Nothing Is Lost

Our daughter is currently two-and-a-half, an age which feels like the end of babyhood for her. She's becoming much more independent and speaks her own mind. It seems like both a long and short time ago since she was a tiny newborn placed in our arms – something a few families in our congregation have experienced a lot more recently! One of the most important lessons of parenting for me has been the power of presence. As parents or caregivers to children, we can't get everything right, especially not in these hectic pandemic days of juggling work/homeschooling/housework responsibilities all while attending to everyone's mental health. But a parent's or caregiver's presence is a



powerful thing for a child, and often provides a lot more comfort than we realize. Sarah Bessey talks about this as one of the major things a newborn learns – that when they cry, someone will be there to comfort them – their parent will show up, this relationship is reliable.

For Bessey, who is a mother of four, her mantra for those hazy newborn days is, *“I’m here, you’re not alone.”* And Bessey applies this mantra and this image of the mothering of a newborn to God’s response to us when we are suffering or in crisis. She writes, “I

imagine God sweeping into the world, like a mother to her crying child in the darkness with that physical yearning, gathering us up out of our loneliness and our hunger, our longing and our needs to whisper: ***I'm here, I'm here, you're not alone, I'm here. I've got you, I've got you, I've got you, darling, I'm here.***"¹



"The Pillar of Fire By Night" – By Stacy Lee

Our scripture for today focuses on God's presence, which is a fascinating theme in the Bible. I think immediately of the time of the Israelites wandering in the wilderness, when God's presence was actually visible with the wandering people in the form of a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night (Exodus 13). Lucky them, to have such clear, visual proof of God's presence which was always with them! The rest of us have to go a little more by faith rather than sight. And it can be hard to keep

that faith, especially in the wilderness.

Walter Brueggemann, the renowned Old Testament scholar, wrote a book within the first six weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic shut-down, entitled, *Virus as a Summons to Faith: Biblical Reflections in a Time of Loss, Grief, and Anxiety*.² (I guess since he's retired and presumably doesn't have little kids at home, he's able to be impossibly

¹ <https://sarahbessey.com/im-here-youre-not-alone/>

² Walter Brueggemann, *Virus as a Summons to Faith: Biblical Reflections in a Time of Loss, Grief, and Anxiety* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020).

productive - amazing! Maybe writing is his coping mechanism.) Anyway, using passages from Jeremiah and 1 Kings, Brueggemann looks at how the Israelites coped during times of crisis like war or “pestilence” – also known as pandemics or plagues. He says that people of faith have two main jobs during times like this:

1. “[T]o engage in *relentless, uncompromising hope*” – This involves both the hope that “we will get through this” but also that “God will not quit until ... all of God’s creation will come to wellbeing.” So our first job as people of faith is to hope.
2. “[T]he second task ... is the work in the meantime *to be witnesses to the hesed (tenacious solidarity) of God* that persists amid pestilence. It is the witness of Jeremiah that in the midst of abandonment, God has not abandoned. Or [...that] the seemingly barren wilderness is grace-occupied.”³

So our two jobs as people of faith in a time of pandemic are to **hope** and to **witness to God’s presence** – that God has not abandoned us. Another translation of *hesed* is loving-kindness, and it’s the word used for Ruth, who clung to Naomi and refused to let her go. It’s the very opposite of abandonment. It’s tenacious solidarity and a loving presence that will not leave us.

For Brueggemann, prayer plays a role in these two jobs. He says, it’s interesting to see how little the writers of the Bible cared about the details of the disasters unfolding around them – “as though they are of no great interest.” Same with God’s answer to the people – not much time is given to that. Most of the focus is on what people of faith are doing in the meantime, while they’re waiting for God to respond. And that’s this posture of hope and trust in God’s constant presence, an attitude which is fostered and formed in the practice of prayer. Prayer shapes our imaginations and our spirits, orienting us

³ Brueggemann, 32.

toward God and who God is (the God of the covenant, the God of justice and peace) and who we are (people in covenant relationship with God). So prayer, even in times of pandemic, isn't so much about asking for something and hoping God will give it; it's not a transaction. Rather, it's about fostering trust in the God we know and love, the God with whom we have a covenant relationship, whose presence alone is a comfort to us.⁴

We see some of this play out in Psalm 105, which is a prayer or song of praise. In it, the people are encouraged to give thanks to God, "Seek the Lord and his strength, seek his presence continually" and to remember God's deeds, to remember who God is. "Remember the wonderful works he has done, his miracles and the judgments he has uttered, O offspring of his servant Abraham, children of Jacob, his chosen ones. He is the Lord our God ... He is mindful of his covenant forever, of the word that he commanded, for a thousand generations, the covenant he made with Abraham, his sworn promise to Isaac, which he confirmed to Jacob as a statute, to Israel as an everlasting covenant" (v. 5-10). In this song or prayer, God is above all a God who keeps God's covenant, who has promised to be with the people, and to be with them forever – to never leave them. The language couldn't be stronger here. God's presence is a powerful thing, even – or especially – in a time of upheaval.

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul famously picks up on this Jewish theology of God's presence in Romans 8. Our passage starts off with an important assurance: that even when we are too weak or weary to pray, God's Spirit is present with us: "the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words" (v. 26). So even if

⁴ See Brueggemann, 42.

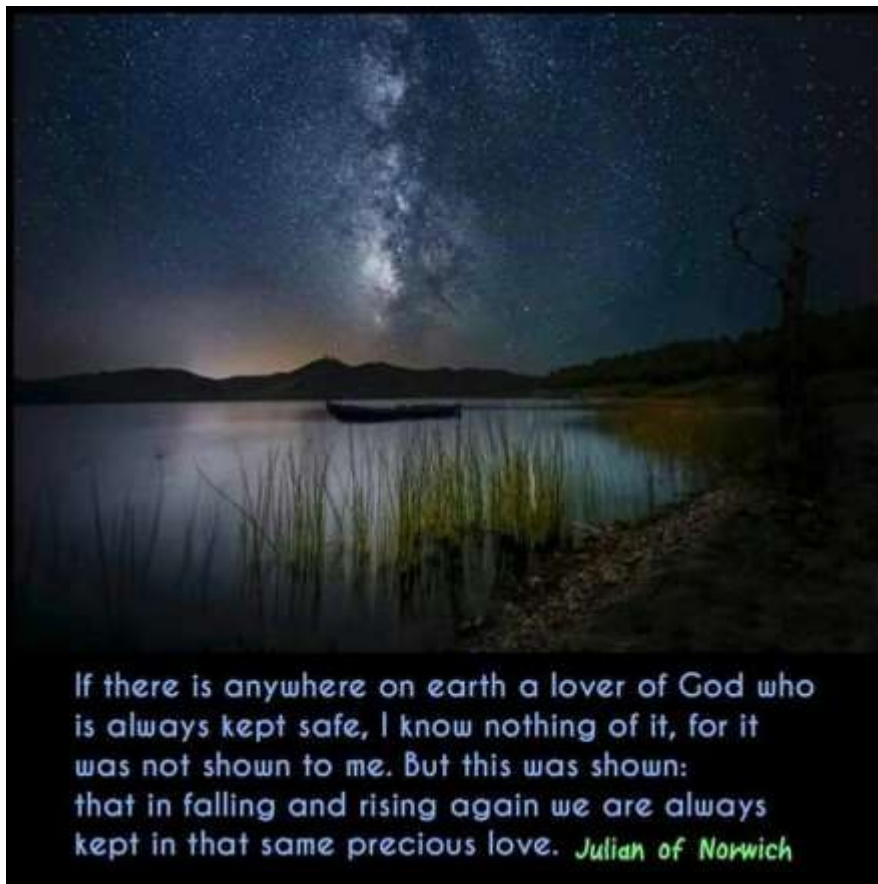
we are to the point of being unable to pray those prayers of hope and trust that Brueggemann talks about, God is there, knowing what we need and helping us to pray however we are able.

And then, we have, of course, the end of our passage, these moving words about nothing being able to separate us from God's love: "³⁵ Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.' ³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (v. 35-39). Here again is that "tenacious solidarity," that Ruth-like *hesed* or lovingkindness that will not let us go no matter what. And remember that this book was written during a time of great upheaval and persecution of the early church – Paul hints at this in speaking of "being killed all day long" like sheep to the slaughter, and his mention of persecution and the sword. These weren't abstract, but very real threats being experienced by the early Christians. And yet in the midst of all of this, God was there. That doesn't mean that God was fixing everything or that they were miraculously spared from what was happening. But even in the midst of this, God would not let them go. Nothing could take from them their identity as beloved children of God.

Kate Bowler writes about something similar in her memoir, *Everything Happens for a Reason – and Other Lies I've Loved*.⁵ She talks about being diagnosed with

⁵ Kate Bowler, *Everything Happens for a Reason – and Other Lies I've Loved* (New York: Random House, 2018).

terminal colon cancer at age 35 – a shocking event that turns her world and her faith upside down. She talks about how when she thought about her own early death – her worst nightmare – what started to stand out wasn't the question of why, but the question of who was there. She says, "when I was sure I was going to die, I didn't feel angry. I felt loved." At her worst point, she began to have this very clear yet inexplicable sense of God's presence with her. "At a time when I should have felt abandoned by God, I was not reduced to ashes. I felt like I was floating, floating on the love and prayers of all those who hummed around me like worker bees, bringing notes and flowers and warm socks and quilts embroidered with words of encouragement. They came in like priests and mirrored back to me the face of Jesus."⁶ Bowler's experience is a contemporary



version of Paul's words that nothing – not even death, not even a terminal cancer diagnosis at age 35, not even a global pandemic – can separate us from the tenacious, everlasting love of God that will not let us go. Fourteenth-century mystic Julian of

⁶ Bowler, 120-121.

Norwich said it this way: “If there is anywhere on earth a lover of God who is always kept safe, I know nothing of it, for it was not shown to me. But this was shown: that in falling and rising again we are always kept in that same precious love.”

Bowler’s comments about sensing the love of God in the love that people showed to her is telling, though. How is it that we live out this sense that God will never abandon us? By refusing to abandon one another – by being “the face of Christ” to one another, as Bowler puts it. And Brueggemann would agree, speaking of acts of “tenacious solidarity” that we show our neighbours. We live out the presence of God to one another “by neighbourly gesture in a time of fear, by neighbourly generosity and hospitality in a time of self-preoccupation, and by neighbourly policies [like the deferral of debts] in the face of predatory greed.”⁷ Like Bessey’s image of God, our Mother who comforts her newborn baby in the middle of the night, we can say to each other, “*I’m here, you’re not alone.*” So this week, I invite us to consider this question: how might we be the presence of God to one another in this time? How might we continue to use our creativity to be present to one another even when physical, in-person presence is not possible? How might we live out and embody the hope in God’s constant and comforting presence, from which nothing can separate us?

I close with the words of a Celtic prayer of blessing which continues this invitation:

*May the Christ who walks on wounded feet
walk with you on the road.
May the Christ who serves with wounded hands*

⁷ Brueggemann, 32.

*stretch out your hands to serve.
May the Christ who loves with a wounded heart
open your hearts to love.
May you see the face of Christ
in everyone you meet,
and may everyone you meet
see the face of Christ in you.*

Amen