

Past, Present, and Future

July 26, 2020

Has anyone heard of the new slang term “doomscrolling”? Ironically, I learned about doomscrolling as I was scrolling on my phone.

Lulu Garcia-Navarro on NPR explains doomscrolling as “incessantly scrolling through bottomless doom-and-gloom news for hours as you sink into a pool of despair.” It’s the modern version of the nighttime Whatifs from Shel Silverstein’s poem from our Prayer of Confession.

Why do we do it? According to clinical psychologist, Dr. Amelia Alda, it’s a vicious cycle. Our mind is wired to look for threats—the more threats we find, the more time we spend scrolling for them. We find more dangers, and then our mind is sucked into looking for more threats.

While doomscrolling may be new, being filled with questions is not. At the beginning of our Romans passage for today (Romans 8:26-39), Paul writes, “for we do not know how to pray as we ought.”

God of the Past

But even with all of our uncertainty, our first point today is that God of the past has shown great and steadfast love to us. Let’s go back to the passage from Romans that I read a few moments ago. Both the first few verses which state, “We know that all things work together for the good for those who love God,” and the last few about “nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus” are among the most familiar and quoted verses from the New Testament.

But what about those eight verses in the middle? Why does Paul start talking about predestination? Well, at the beginning of this passage, it says that the Spirit intercedes for us.

But you know what? The Spirit doesn’t just intercede for us in the present. Those following verses give us insight into the past as well. In verse 29, it uses both the words “foreknew” and “predestined.” If you know anything about Calvinism, predestination can be a loaded word. Are some people “predestined” for salvation, while others aren’t?

Not wanting to get into a whole debate or lecture over Five-Point Calvinism vs. Arminianism, let me share with you a couple strategies for dealing with these tough passages. One is: See how the word is used in other parts of the Bible. Another is: Check out other translations.

So, what does this look like? From reading a commentary on this passage, I learned that the word “predestined” in this verse is only found again in Acts, I Corinthians, and Ephesians. Now, like probably most of you, I don’t read Greek. But there are a few helpful online Bible study sites that both Pastor Bridget and I use. By using one of these online resources, I was able to learn so much about not only this passage, but other passages with this word.

For example, here are three translations of Ephesians 1:5.

The Living Bible says: “[God’s] unchanging plan has always been to adopt us into [God’s] own family...And [God] did this because [God] wanted to!”

The Message version goes like this: “Long ago before [God] laid down earth’s foundations, [God] had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of [God’s] love, to be made whole and holy by [God’s] love.”

In the Passion Translation, Ephesians 1:5 is written: “For it was always in [God’s] perfect plan to adopt us as [God’s] delightful children.”

Last year, the death of someone I had never met in person rocked my world. Pastor Bridget knows about this, but I wanted to tell you about it today since I haven’t preached since it happened. The day after my birthday, May 4, 2019, Rachel Held Evans died. She was 37 years old.

Why did her death affect me so profoundly, and what does her death and life have to do with this sermon, and predestination for that matter? Rachel challenged our ideas about politics and religion. As Eliza Griswold wrote in The New Yorker two days after Rachel’s death, Rachel “called for an intersectional approach to Christianity that embraced people of color, LGBTQ people, and women in all roles in the church.

This wasn’t a question of politics for Rachel; it was a biblical mandate. Rachel “fiercely insisted that God’s love included everyone, and she attempted to offer those who’d been shunned by the church a way to return.” As Nadia Bolz-Weber, progressive pastor and Rachel’s friend told the author, “Rachel pried open the door and then put her foot in the threshold and kept it open for other people.”

God of the past, keep us in your faithfulness, your righteousness, and uprightness of heart toward you.

God of the Present

Second, God of the present is listening when we find ourselves with more questions than answers, not even knowing how to pray.

While doomscrolling may be new, being filled with questions is not. In the passage from I Kings that Janet read for us today, we learn that Solomon became king in place of his father David when he was “only a little child.”

So, just how old was Solomon when he became king? About 20 years old! Twenty years old when he became King of Israel, a people that he says are “so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted.”

Thankfully, Solomon recognized that he was full of questions, and said, “I do not know how to go out or come in.” He calls himself a “servant” and asks for “an understanding mind to govern, able to discern between good and evil, for who can govern this your great people?”

In this simple request, what can we learn from Solomon:

1. Humility: Solomon is King of Israel, yet he recognizes he is still God's servant.
2. We don't have it all figured out and we don't have to: Solomon asks for an understanding mind and an ability to discern between good and evil.
3. Recognition that others are God's great people: Solomon knows that the people are God's children first and foremost, not only his constituents.

We also can learn from God's response to Solomon. God knows that many kings could ask for long life, riches, or power over their enemies. In other words, what we don't ask for can be as important as what we do. Because the Lord was pleased with Solomon's request, God gave Solomon what he requested, a wise and discerning mind.

Back in 2016, the first time I preached here at Union a friend of mine, with whom I taught in Honduras posted something on Facebook that I haven't been able to get out of my head or heart even since then. My friend, (Sara Schipper-Nelson) wrote: "When the head of the CDC BREAKS DOWN pleading for more funds to stop the spread of Zika—or coronavirus—you know it's serious. Our Congress acts irresponsibly and puts people's lives at risk. The biggest threats that face us are those linked to climate change. Vote. Wisely."

Just as our faith compels us to protect the earth and the welfare of those living on it—present and future—our faith also compels us to work for healing and wholeness. In a July 16 report from WBAY: "According to The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Black women are two to three times more likely to die from pregnancy-related causes than white women." One study suggested that here in Wisconsin, Black women are five times as likely to die.

The moral and ethical work of 'protecting the earth and the welfare of those living on it' means working for healing and wholeness. Just as in the civil rights movement, regarding health care, "Justice deferred is justice denied."

God of the present, You, Spirit, help us in our weakness, and intercede for us according to Your will.

God of the Future

Third, God of the future tells us that nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from Christ's love. Just as it was in God's unchanging, perfect plan to adopt us as delightful children long before the foundations of the earth, nothing in the future will be able to separate us from Christ's love. "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 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."

So, from God's unchanging, perfect plan in the past, to nothing separating us from Christ's love in the present or in times to come, we are ALL wholly and completely loved by God: EVERYONE, EVERYWHERE, ALWAYS!

What can this love look like in practice? Part of this inclusive love, which includes people of color and all people on the LGBTQ spectrum, also includes women and children. In Forbes,

Avivah Wittenberg-Cox writes that women are “gifting us an attractive way of wielding power.” How so? During this COVID-19 crisis, women are demonstrating truth, decisiveness, use of technology, and love.

Norway’s Prime Minister, Erna (Arna) Solberg (Suulberg), had the innovative idea of using television to talk directly to her country’s children. She was building on the short, three-minute press conference that Danish Prime Minister Mette (Meta) Frederiksen (Fayiksen) had held a couple of days earlier. Norway’s Solberg held a dedicated press conference where no adults were allowed. She responded to kids’ questions from across the country, taking time to explain why it was OK to feel scared.

Like King Solomon, these women are leading with humility, discernment, and wisdom. What are some other leaders doing on the other hand? Exactly what I Kings tells us that Solomon DID NOT do. They’re focusing on riches and on their enemies.

Even locally, we can learn from how women are gifting us a wise way of yielding power. On Tuesday evening, at the seven-hour Green Bay Common Council Meeting, the alderwomen listened, were open to amendments, and then presented their decisions, based on both listening to their constituents and health care professionals, in measured, professional, and respectful ways.

Finally, many of you know that I’m a 2nd grade teacher and a mother. As this school year draws near, it often seems that there are more questions than answers. So I pray, and invite you to pray for all students, parents, teachers, school administrators, and elected officials.

Please pray that we would:

- First and foremost, love each other and love our children well.

What does this look like? Pray that we would:

- Listen to each other, including our kids, teachers, scientists, and health care professionals.
- Utilize our science and technology resources and empower others to do the same.
- Be open and flexible.
- And then, make the best decisions we can considering all factors.

When we do all this, third, we can be convinced that nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from God’s love in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Conclusion

What can we do? First, we can march for justice and freedom. As we’ll sing in our final hymn, we are marching. As Rachel Held Evans fiercely insisted, God’s love includes everyone. I’m thankful to be part of a church with you all who extends an extravagant welcome to those who may have been shunned by other churches and society. Justice and freedom are part of inclusion. As we saw in I Kings and Romans today, this isn’t a question of politics; it’s a biblical mandate.

Second, we can pray for wisdom and courage. As we will sing shortly, our God of Grace and God of Glory wants to grant us wisdom and courage, just as Solomon asked.

Third and finally, we can dance in God's love. In this day and age of COVID-19 and doomscrolling, it is way too easy to get sucked into vicious cycles that breed more anxiety rather than free us to dance and rest in God's love.

How can we change these 'vicious cycles' for 'virtuous cycles' as Lulu Garcia-Navarro suggests?

1. Be mindful. The meditation app that I use has helped me to establish my purpose and intention when I use my phone. Check in with yourself periodically when you're on your phone or watching the news and ask if you're doing what you planned to do.
2. Set boundaries. Use a timer if you need to. Set goals. For example, I've been trying to turn off my Facebook app until I accomplish other goals for the day, like writing this sermon!)
3. Self-care. Eating well, exercising, connecting with others, meditation, counseling—whatever it means to take care of yourself.

And last, but not least, as people of faith, we have prayer. I invite you to pray with me and throughout this week and throughout this time Solomon's prayer from I Kings 3:9:

*"Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people,
able to discern between good and evil."*

Also, you can pray Romans 8:38-39:

"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 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."

Even when we are filled with whatifs, God is listening, longing to give us wise and discerning minds. The Spirit helps us in our weakness, assuring us that nothing yesterday, today, or forever can separate us from the love of God! Amen.

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1 Kings 3:5-12; Romans 8:26-39
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