

Nothing Can Separate Us

Psalm 130, Romans 8:26–39

Center Church (via Zoom)

March 29, 2020

Rochelle A. Stackhouse

As soon as the coronavirus and COVID–19 began to spread in this country, some clergy and religious people began to proclaim some very interesting theology. First of all, people proclaimed that this was a punishment from God. Then, of course, they had to say what it was a punishment *for*. The list ranged over the usual topics: gay marriage, transgender people, abortion, women’s rights, taking the Bible out of schools. Rev. Ralph Drollinger, who leads a weekly Bible Study for members of the President’s Cabinet, wrote a blog indicating that God sent the virus to punish people “with depraved minds,” environmentalists, and atheists. I’ve read folk on the left saying clearly this is God punishing Trump and his associates. On the other hand, some are attributing the disease to Satan who wants us to stay out of church in Holy Week and on Easter, seeking to defeat the Resurrection. Then there are those who say that all you have to do is pray and live righteously and the disease will not affect you. We have heard all this stuff before, but as it seems to be ramping up on steroids this time, I want to say something about God and this virus.

What prompts us to wonder and say these things is a deep wish to know “why.” Why is this happening, and why now? Allied to that is the “who can we blame?” question. If we can find someone to blame (the Chinese, LGBTQ people, Republicans, Democrats), then we know who to attack in order to punish them for doing this to us.

I’d like us to take a step back from the theological “why” question a minute. It’s important for scientists to explore that question, because it may help to prevent a similar outbreak in the future. But instead of running ourselves in circles over the why in terms of God’s involvement with this, what if we changed the question to “where is God in the midst of this outbreak of COVID-19?”

On that question, Paul has some guidance for us that may be more helpful than all the hate-mongers out there. I want to lift up a couple of sentences from the Romans reading for today.

First, “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God’s purpose.” You could interpret that as saying that as long as we love God, only good things will happen to us. In Paul’s context, that would have been unhelpful in the extreme, because the people in the Roman church were being persecuted and slaughtered. So, obviously, that’s not what Paul means. One scholar (Paul Achtemeier, *Interpretation Commentary on Romans*, p. 143) thinks Paul is getting at this:

“It is the confession that because we are in God’s hands, the kind of God who sent his own Son for us, all things will finally resolve into good.” Paul is saying that God’s ultimate hope for us is good, not evil. More than once Jesus corrected people who came to him seeking to blame illness or injury on God’s punishment, and each time he contradicted them. God’s will for us, Jesus said again and again, is life, and life abundant. We are called to be patient and do our part to work with God for good, not to waste energy and intellect blaming God or other people for what is happening.

Then Paul writes one of the most beautiful, powerful theological statements ever uttered. Eugene Peterson renders it like this: “Do you think anyone is going to be able to drive a wedge between us and Christ’s love for us? There is no way! Not trouble, not hard times, not hatred, not hunger, not homelessness, not bullying threats, not backstabbing, not even the worst sins listed in Scripture. None of this fazes us because Jesus loves us. I am absolutely convinced that nothing—nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable—absolutely nothing can get between us and God’s love.”

I say that to those who claim that God’s love excludes people and then sends a virus to punish them and anyone in a country that includes them. I say that to those who claim that God’s love is manifest in sending a plague that kills people of all ages, tongues and races, all

sexual orientations and gender identities, all political parties and ideologies, the poor and the rich. I say that to those who say that God participates in whatever their own brand of hatred may be.

Where is God in the midst of these times? Loving us. Loving us deeply, passionately, healing-ly. Where is God in the midst of these times? Empowering us to love in similar ways at any opportunity we get, whether in our words, our actions, our posting on social media, our phone calls, our letters, our prayers.

Recently, several people have quoted to me this line from the film *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (originally said by John Lennon): “Everything will be okay in the end; if it’s not okay, it’s not the end.” That is certainly taking the long view, because for many people during this virus outbreak, things will not be okay. However, they will continue to be loved by God, so that what seems the end is not the end of God’s love for them, for their families, for all of us. Nothing can separate us....

Beloved, do not allow yourselves to be caught up in blaming, shaming or spinning your head and heart in circles over the “why” of this. It may be that we will never know. Instead, as the Psalmist says, “Wait for the Lord, and in God’s word, hope. For with the Lord there is steadfast love.” Love that does not end, from which we cannot be separated. Thanks be to God. Amen.