

First Presbyterian Church  
Bozeman, Montana  
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*Fourth Sunday in Lent*  
Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22

## **No Matter What**

From time to time I will have conversations with folks who are speculating or are even distressed over the seeming string of misfortunes they have suffered recently. Sometimes they are merely annoyed. But sometimes they are genuinely at their wits' end—overwhelmed and on the brink of defeat. Once in awhile they will conjecture that God must be punishing them for something. They search through their lives trying to figure out what it is that they did or not do that has angered God to the point they are now being punished by God. Or they will speculate that God must be trying to teach them a lesson through the misfortunes bestowed upon them.

Nothing could be farther from the truth about God and the nature of the troubles we face. Not only have their experiences clouded their perspective, they have shrouded their ability to recognize God so that they think they're seeing God in the role of doling out punishment. We in the Western world have been taught to think so thoroughly logically that we begin to believe that we live in a sort of cosmic Christian logic in which the righteous are rewarded and the unrighteous are punished. This logic can lead to the conclusion that we live in a simple and consistent, and yet brutal, world of cause and effect.

This is not to say that our actions don't have consequences. And furthermore it's not to say that there isn't a sort of logic to the consequences that we experience from our actions. But those consequences are not doled out by God.

Take the current economic crisis for a moment. The collapse and near-collapse of our nation's financial institutions are not the result of some random set of circumstances. These collapses are due to the actions and decisions by the movers and shakers within those institutions to enter into very shaky and risky ventures that had little or no basis for them. These bankers and other financiers turned their backs on the solid conservatism for which they used to have been known and in so doing brought shame upon themselves and in the process dragged millions of others down with them. In this case, these financial people are experiencing the negative consequences of their risky and foolhardy behavior. What is tragic is that their behavior has had consequences that go way beyond them and their immediate families—millions of others have been imperiled or negatively affected.

It is these ancillary effects that are dragging people down in which they are losing their mortgages, or losing their ability to qualify for a mortgage, or losing the accumulated value of their investments, or losing their jobs. These bad things that are happening to people are not God's doing. They are the result of human greed and selfishness.

On a global scale, the plight of the millions of people who are unable to provide for their children or themselves and who go to bed hungry each night is also not the direct result of their righteousness or lack of righteousness in God's eyes.

Take for example the situation that continues to deteriorate in Zimbabwe—a country of which we speak often in this church because of our connection with fellow Christians there. We often mention the completely out of control inflation in that country. I heard this week that inflation has now reached the milestone that the value of the Zimbabwe

currency is now less than the value of the paper on which it is printed. It is hard to believe how such an unbelievably bad situation continues to get worse there.

Is God punishing the people of Africa? Is God trying to teach the Africans a lesson? The Christian church on the African continent continues to grow exponentially. The vitality of African Christians is truly awe-inspiring. If God is doling out rewards and punishments, why is Africa so impoverished and imperiled?

My friends, God is not a God of rewards and punishments. God is not monitoring human behavior so as to bless some and curse others.

So where do we find God in the midst of this current situation in which so many are hurting and suffering?

It is this question that the people of God have been asking across the ages. And it's a question that is frequently found in the Book of Psalms in the Bible. For these first weeks of the Lenten season, leading up to Easter, this year we have been focusing on one of the psalms each week. Today we have taken a portion of Psalm 107 as our focus scripture text.

This psalm is one of the many psalms of thanksgiving that can be found throughout the psalter. In this case, the psalm expresses praise and thanksgiving to God for the steadfast love of God that tenaciously persists throughout history. It is this steadfast love that redeems and frees the people of God from the shackles of the troubles that they face as they go through life. "O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever." (Ps. 107:1)

After this opening of thanksgiving, this psalm goes on to make mention of four examples in which God offers relief and care to those who are in peril, one of which is the focus of our attention today—in this case the matter of sickness and ill health.

Sickness is understood to be the result of human behavior that brings it on. Rather than God being understood as the cause of sickness, it is here understood as having been brought on as a consequence of behavior.

As is usually the case in Eugene Peterson's rendering of the Bible, *The Message*, no words are minced in making clear the meaning of the text. "Some of you were sick because you'd lived a bad life, your bodies feeling the effects of your sin; You couldn't stand the sight of food, so miserable you thought you'd be better off dead." (Ps. 107:17-18)

It is into this situation of desperate sickness that God is shown to hear their cries of despair and acts with love and compassion to redeem and free them from this oppression. It is this redemption that is celebrated and highlighted as the psalmist declares God's steadfast love and faithfulness. And in so doing provides inspiration to the generations who will follow right down to the present day. "Then you called out to God in your desperate condition; he got you out in the nick of time. He spoke the word that healed you, that pulled you back from the brink of death. So thank God for his marvelous love, for his miracle mercy to the children he loves; Offer thanksgiving sacrifices, tell the world what he's done—sing it out!" (*The Message*, Ps. 107:19-22)

Mark E. Stanger has written,

“God does not send illness or tragedy to punish. But human sinfulness and its effects certainly affect bodily well-being. Abuse, overwork and stress, despair, bad relationships, depression, unexpressed grief, guilt or shame, rejection and isolation, emotional or physical deprivation, poor self-care, addictions—all of these may come from human selfishness, injustice, or their effects. Human selfishness and disregard for the world’s natural riches directly affect human health and the availability of clean air, clean water, and food. Lack of these may bring physical illness, loss of appetite and vitality. The season of Lent calls the community to repent not only of personal wrongdoing but also of corporate and systemic evil that diminish human lives and the Creator’s gift of the natural environment. The cultivation of the human spirit and body, of healthy relationships and culture, of just civilizations, and of the earth’s resources belong to God’s people as a sacred calling.” (*Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Year B, Vol. 2.* David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, ed., Westminster John Knox Press, 2008. p. 109)

Throughout the history of humans, God has been on prowl for a good and right relationship with the human beings created in God’s image. This Psalm is a case in point that God has been in the redemption endeavor long before God sent Jesus into the human community. God’s amazing love for us has shown itself time and time again across the ages. Our human sinful arrogance continues to be the biggest obstacle standing between that perfect loving relationship between God and humanity.

So undaunted was God in the pursuit of this relationship that God chose to go the full distance to come to us on our own human terms. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” (Jn. 3:16)

So in these tough times when, according to the National Sleep Foundation, “46% of Americans say they’re unable to get a good night’s sleep, and most cite the nation’s economic crisis as the main culprit,” (*The Week*, Mar. 13, 2009, p. 19) and when you may find yourself wondering why you’re experiencing so much in the way of bad luck or misfortune, look to God not as the source of your trouble, but rather as the source of steadfast love that will sustain and redeem, no matter what..

Let us pray.

Loving God, you guide the wanderer, heal the sick, free the captive, nourish the hungry. You love and care for us. Accept our response of praise and thanksgiving, and gather us from every place into the community of your mercy and grace. Amen.