

THE HOLY TRINITY, C
Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31
Lutheran Church
(Psalm 8)
Romans 5:1-5
John 16:12-15

Melinda J. Wagner
First Immanuel
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A father was reflecting about his college-age daughters and how different they are from a lot of their peers. He said it seems like many of his daughters' college friends view life as something that is basically random and hazardous. They aren't expecting to discover any particular meaning in their lives, apart from what they can manage to create for themselves. Instead they assume that life is all about seeking your fortune or looking for romantic love, or just grabbing whatever you can to make your existence more comfortable. As they graduate, their goal is to "get mine" or "take care of myself" – such a narrow and limited way of engaging the world. The father says it really makes him sad to observe this, because it's so different from the way he and his family see the world. Their Christian faith gives them a clearer sense of purpose and hope.

This is the kind of question that often brings people to church. Is there any meaning to this life beyond "getting mine" and protecting the circle of people that are closest to me?

It's also a question that brings folks into conversation with people of faith, like you and me. I know a woman who grew up with no religious background, but she was seeking. She was impressed by a certain quality of peace she noticed in a coworker. This man was able to stay centered through tough times, as though he had some kind of wellspring or reserve of strength he was drawing on. That was something she was longing for. So finally she asked this guy, "What is it with you?" And she learned that Christian faith was the cornerstone of his life. He didn't make a big deal about it, but his faith was what centered him and gave him hope. Over time, they had a chance to talk about who God was to him, and those stirrings and questions she'd been feeling were met by the message of Christ's love. The Spirit was at work through this ordinary coworker and his ordinary congregation to bring her a sense of purpose and hope. Through them she learned that the world is far from a random place – that at the heart of everything that is, there is a God who loves and forgives us and holds us fast.

Even those of us who profess a Christian faith often wrestle with serious questions about meaning and God.

When we are down or feeling lost or confused, we may ask: *Is God really there?*
When we go through illness or trouble, or someone we love dies, we ask: *Does God care? Does God really listen to those prayers?* In times of unsettling change, like a

lot of people are facing today, we may ask in a serious way: *What is this world coming to? Where are we headed?*

When we're going through a difficult time, it can be almost like we have blinders on. Our vision gets narrow and small and we can't see beyond what we're experiencing right now. At times like these, we need a word from beyond ourselves to open us up to the wide, far-reaching reality of God's love.

We need a word like the one that comes to us today in Proverbs, where scripture describes the Wisdom of God appearing everywhere, making God known. Scripture describes God's Wisdom calling out to people from the hillsides, from the crossroads, from the town squares, announcing that God delights in this world. The message is that God's compassion and truth and goodness are embedded everywhere — in the beauty of nature, in relationships among people. All these things can reveal God to those who are ready to receive.

We need the reminder that although life may sometimes appear to be random, scripture says quite the opposite is true. God's wisdom, God's essence, is alive in all things. God's compassion holds all things together. God's reality is what makes this world tick. So whether we perceive it or not, from our small perspective, the great and wide truth is that God is continually at work, bringing all things together in Christ's love.

When we are asking hard questions or living through hard times, we also need a word like the one that comes to us in Romans, about how God's love creates hope in the midst of suffering.

Paul knew what hard times were about. He had been in prison, frightened and in danger many times. But he had also learned that God holds us fast, especially when we are suffering. Paul wrote that

suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. (Rom 5:3-5)

That's quite a statement—something I suspect was born out of Paul's own life experiences, not his intellect but what he learned through living. It's not saying suffering is a good thing, or that God gives us hard times in order to teach us some kind of a lesson. I'm always skeptical of people who think they can interpret God's purpose in everything that happens. Lots of times we just plain don't understand what God is up to, in any given moment. But as Paul say, God's love is the one constant throughout all our human ups and downs. While we are suffering, enduring, growing and learning, it's God who gives us the hope we need, God who pours love into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. Even though we cannot clearly see God's plan or fully understand our part in it, God steadies and encourages us.

And even through events that may seem random from our human perspective, there is always that strong current of God's love running through all things.

At every moment, in every circumstance, we are connected to God's constant love that will never let us go. When Jesus left his disciples, he promised to send them the Spirit of truth, the Holy Spirit, to guide them. And the Holy Spirit is still God's presence with us today, the lifeline connecting us to Christ and to our Parent God.

God's Spirit connects us to God's wisdom and gives us insight to deal with life's questions as they come. God's Spirit lives the questions with us and "guides us into all the truth." So that whether we are children encountering life's early freshness, or graduates searching for our place in the adult world, or mature adults weathering the storms of illness or conflict or job loss or heavy responsibilities... God's Spirit teaches us, as we are ready to learn. And Christ promises that God will keep on teaching the human family, through all the generations, until God's good purpose is finally fulfilled.

We can't see the whole of our journey or the human journey from any single place, but we place our trust in God's Wisdom and God's good purpose. There's an old traditional Jewish story that encourages us to be patient while we wait for God's wisdom to unfold:

There were two young brothers who had always lived in the city and never saw field or a meadow. But one day they decided to visit the country.

As they went walking along the road they saw a farmer plowing his field. They were puzzled. "What on earth is he doing that for?" they wondered. "Why should someone take a smooth piece of land covered with nice green grass and dig it up?"

Later they watched the farmer sowing grains of wheat along the furrows. "That man must be crazy!" they said. "He takes perfectly good wheat and throws it into the dirt."

"I don't like the country. Only crazy people live here!" said one man, so he went back to the city.

The brother who stayed in the country saw a change take place a few weeks later. The plowed field began to sprout tender green shoots, even more beautiful than before. He wrote his brother in the city to come at once and see the wonderful change.

His brother came and was delighted. As time passed they watched the sprouts grow into golden heads of wheat. Now they both understood the purpose of the farmer's work.

But when the wheat became ripe the farmer began to cut it down. The impatient brother exclaimed: "What?? That farmer is insane! He worked so hard all these months to produce this lovely wheat, and now with his own hands he's cutting it down! I'm so disgusted with this idiot, I'm going back to town!"

But his brother, the patient one, held his peace and remained in the country. He watched the farmer gather the wheat into his granary. He saw him skillfully separate the grain from the chaff. He was filled with wonder when he realized that the farmer had harvested a hundred times the amount of seed that he had sowed. Then he understood that there was meaning to everything that the farmer had done.

The message of the story is this: We human beings only see the beginning of any of God's works. Only God knows the ending.

There may come a day when we understand God's wisdom as fully as we understand the life-cycle of wheat, but for now, we trust to God for all that we can't see. Because we believe that beyond what we can see, God's good purposes are always at work for life and blessing, so all creation can be finally be gathered together in love. Thanks be to God. Amen.

(The story comes from *A Treasury of Jewish Folklore: Stories, Traditions, Legends, Humor, Wisdom and Folk Songs of the Jewish People*, Edited by Nathan Ausubel, Copyright, 1948, Crown Publishers, Inc., NY – quoted by Rev. Brian Stoffregen in *Crossmarks*, 2007)