

THE HOLY TRINITY, C
Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31
Romans 5:1-5
John 16:12-15

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A father was reflecting about his young adult daughter and her outlook on life. Making your way in the world is always a challenge, but added to this, she and her peers have been deeply affected by the pandemic. They are struggling to envision their future, and the planet's future, in the midst of social conflict and climate damage and more. From his daughter's perspective, life often seems random and hazardous. Some of her friends have thrown themselves into activism as a response. Others are doubling down on career plans, funneling energy into their personal survival tactics of taking care of themselves and protecting their own. This father really grieves their woundedness, which is a woundedness all of us are feeling right now. He often asks himself what his Christian faith has to say to a world where uncertainty is a given, and fear is always lurking. He remembers a day when his faith gave him a clearer sense of purpose and hope, the ability to deeply trust in the face of fear. It's this sense of hope and trust that he yearns to reclaim and share with the people he loves.

I knew a woman who grew up with no religious background, but she was open to the life of the spirit. She was going through a difficult personal transition and was impressed by a certain quality of peace she noticed in a coworker. This coworker was able to stay centered through the ups and downs that threw other people off, as though she had some kind of wellspring or reserve of strength she was drawing on. It was something my friend was longing for, so finally she asked, "How do you do it?" She learned that although this coworker didn't make a big deal about it, Christian faith was what centered her and gave her hope. Over time they talked more, and the questions she'd been experiencing were met by the message of Christ's love. The Spirit was at work through this ordinary colleague and their ordinary congregation to bring her a sense of purpose and hope. Through them my friend 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.

When we are down or feeling lost or confused, even as people of faith we often 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 all those prayers?* In times of unsettling change like we all face today, we 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 this moment. 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, in the urge for justice and healing that motivates change. All these things can reveal God to those who are ready to receive.

We need the reminder that although life may 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 own small perspectives, 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 painful 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.

Saint Paul knew what hard times were about. He had been in prison, he had been 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, born out of Paul's own life experiences. Paul isn't saying suffering is a good thing, or that God gives us hard times in order to teach us some kind of a lesson. We should always be skeptical of people who insist that "everything happens for a reason," 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, or in a whole season of hardship like our global community is living through. But as Paul says, 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 personally see God's purpose or fully understand our part in it, God steadies us and encourages us. And even when events seem random to us, there is always that strong and sure current of God's love running through all things.

At every moment, in every circumstance, we are connected to God's constant and eternal 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 spiritual lifeline connecting us to Christ and our Creator.

God's Spirit connects us to God's wisdom and gives us insight. 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 accompanying the human family, through all the generations, until God's good purpose is finally fulfilled.

You and I aren't able to see the whole trajectory of our journey or the human journey from any single place, but we are able to 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 this patient brother 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.*

Friends in Christ, there will come a day, beyond this lifetime, when we understand God's wisdom as fully as we understand the life-cycle of wheat. But for now, we trust to God for everything we can't see. We hold to our faith that beyond the horizon of what you and I now perceive, God's good purposes are always at work for life and blessing. God is constantly nurturing life and growth, so that finally all creation will 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)