

A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Providence

June 21, 2020

Third Sunday After Pentecost

Third in a Series of Sermons

June 14, 2020

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Psalm 121 - I lift up my eyes to the hills, from where does my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth

Genesis 50:20 - But Joseph said to them, “Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.”

Romans 8:28 And we know that for those who love God, all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

Dear Friends in Christ,

- Overall sermon series theme - A Long Obedience in the Same Direction
- Two weeks ago, we focused on the importance of living as pilgrims / strangers / sojourners instead of tourists or permanent residents.
- Last week, we focused on daily repentance of our sins instead of explaining/defending/excusing/rationalizing our sins.
- Today we focus on trusting in Divine Providence instead of looking for help in all the wrong places.
- Two parts to our sermon today, and then four stories to illustrate those two parts on the subject of Divine Providence.
 1. **Mama said there'd be days like this.**
 2. **Father knows best.**

Mama said there'd be days like this. That's the refrain of a song by the Shirelles out of the early 1960's. It seemed as though all of their friends were falling in love and making it to the wedding chapel, but not them. It seemed to make them feel a bit better about their lousy circumstances in life to remember that their wise and dear mama had warned them that certain seasons of life are just plain full of trouble.

One of the age-old questions that occasionally torments the people of God is “if God is a good and a gracious God, why is there so much suffering?” Or to ask it another way, “If God is so all powerful and all-knowing and all caring, why doesn't he prevent evil?” Lutheran theologians offer a three-part answer. First, God is opposed to all evil. Secondly, frequently God does intervene and prevent evil things from happening. Third, whenever He permits evil to happen, He controls them so that they serve His purposes.

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Father knows best was first of all a radio program in the late 1940's and then a television show in the 50's starring Robert Young. It seems fitting on this Father's Day that we would recognize the positive traits traditionally associated with good fathers - traits like providing for daily needs and protecting against enemies of the family. Traits like having the big picture in mind and being willing to discipline and allow hard times in the short run, with long term goals in mind.

In my growing up years it was my mama who babied me and my dad who didn't. It was mom who would do the tender and soft and kind and gentle routine, and it was my dad who did the "buck up and deal with it routine." A case in point was New Year's Eve 1971, at age 17, when my first real girlfriend broke up with me in sudden and rather unceremonious fashion. When I took my broken heart to my mom, she listened and she encouraged and she sympathized and she empathized like many of your moms would do. When my dad noticed me moping around and figured out what was the problem, he had six words for me, "there's other fish in the sea." After 46 plus years of marriage to my awesome bride, it's clear that my earthly father knew best. And even more importantly, we celebrate today that our heavenly father knows best in every circumstance, with no exceptions.

Four stories I offer to you this morning, as illustrations of Divine Providence / that Romans 8 language - that God is working everything out for the good of those who love God and are called according to His purposes.

Story #1 - Daniel had taken one last dive, and his neck struck the bottom of the concrete pool. He sustained damage to C-3, C-4, and C-5 vertebrae of his spine. Two fusion operations followed, and the surgeon was successful in preventing paralysis, but that wasn't all. The week before Daniel's father had lost his job, there were three sons to raise, his mom was a new nursing student and was on a tight schedule, their family life was turned upside down. Daniel would be recuperating at home for months. If his mom left school and stayed home, loans would have to be repaid, finances would be even worse, and on top of all of that, father and son had a history of rubbing each other the wrong way. **As mama would say, there'd be days like this!**

They opted for the father to stay home, and blessings followed. Their headstrong son and his impatient father developed an unshakeable bond which had eluded them in his years of working hard and making a living. The dad learned, among other things, how to wash the hair of a child who wore a neck brace, how to cook meals, and how to help Daniel with his meals. Daniel's behavior changed as he was forced to become dependent, he learned to discuss problems without arguing, father and son cemented their relationship with mutual respect and love. The father was able to become the dad he had always wanted to be. The

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world would say this family got lucky, but the people of God believing in Divine Providence would say, in fact, *our Father in heaven knows best.*

Story #2 comes from our Old Testament lesson where Joseph had a thirty nine year history of conflict with his 11 brothers. You may well remember how at age 17, his father Jacob started the trouble by loving Joseph more than the others, he was the son of his old age, he made him a robe of many colors. As time went on, the brothers grew to hate him, they couldn't bring themselves to say a kind word in his direction. As the story goes on, Joseph had a couple of dreams in which he was the superstar and the brothers were subservient, one thing led to another, and the brothers concocted a plan in which they killed him and would say to the father that a fierce animal had devoured him. Reuben and then Judah thought it through a bit more, they decided to make some money off the deal, and so they sold Joseph into slavery. Joseph's story continued with all kinds of successes followed by setbacks, he spent time in prison after false accusations, followed by finding the favor of Pharaoh and eventually ending up in a position where he rose to power, at age 30, as the second most powerful man in Egypt.

No fewer than 13 chapters of Genesis detail this story of God's providence for us, including story after story where Joseph must have wondered if God was so good and gracious, why was there such suffering and such evil in this world. Must have been multiple seasons of life where Joseph yearned for the tender comfort of his mom and the wise strength of his dad. So much that we don't know about Joseph's and his brother's pilgrimage, but this we know - that at the end of it all, the Holy Spirit had worked a faith in Joseph's heart that God in heaven above had a plan. Faith that God had a plan to heal and to prosper and to work everything out for the good of those who trusted in him. Faith that led him to forgive his brothers and to look them in the eyes and say, "*You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.*" The world would say this family got lucky, but the people of God believing in Divine Providence would say, in fact, *our Father in heaven knows best.*

Story #3 comes from Psalm 121. Now keep in mind the three truths our Lutheran theologians want us to remember on the subject of divine providence. #1 - God daily and richly provides for us in body and soul and is absolutely opposed to evil. #2 Almost every day, God keeps really bad stuff from happening to us. And #3 - even when great evil and suffering do come our way, God has promised to those who love him and are called according to his purposes, that he will work it out in a way that serves his purposes.

In the days of Old Testament pilgrims traveling up towards Jerusalem, there were at least three bad things that could happen. 1) You could step on a loose stone and sprain your

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ankle, or as the Psalmist wrote, *your foot could be moved*. 2) You could be over exposed to a hot sun and become faint with sunstroke, or as the Psalmist would say, **the sun would strike you by day**. 3) Or you could be under the pressures of fatigue and anxiety, you could become emotionally ill, which was described by ancient writers as moon stroke, or as lunacy, or as the Psalmist wrote, **the moon would strike you by night**.

In those days, the hills and the mountain ridges were full of pagan worship. Much of their worship was practiced on the hilltops. Shrines were set up, groves of trees were planted, sacred prostitutes both male and female were provided. There were protections and spells and enchantments that could be purchased. You could go to the sun priest and pay for protection against the sun god. You could go the moon priestess and buy an insurance policy against the evening demons. Where would your help come from in those days? The hills?

No, the Psalmist answers, my help comes from the maker of heaven and earth, my help comes not from the hills but the one who created them in the first place. Psalm 121 points us not to creation, but to the Creator for help in all times of trouble. This Creator is always awake, he never dozes or sleeps. Baal would take long naps, and one of the jobs of the priests was to wake him up when someone needed his attention, and they were not always successful. The Creator is Lord over time, he keeps us from all evil, he keeps our going out and our coming in from this time forth and forevermore.

Does this Psalm promise that Christians will never sprain their ankles, will never suffer from heatstroke or mental illness or disease? Does this Psalm promise that the coronavirus will never find its way into our congregation and that the issues of poverty and racism and inner city life will never bring tears to our eyes? Obviously not, experience tells us otherwise. What Psalm 121 does promise is that even when the calamities and the disasters and the trials of life do come our way, true evil will be kept away. True evil would be to decline in our faith, and the worst evil of all would be to lose faith and to live in eternity apart from Christ.

The promise of Psalm 121 is the same as that of Jesus in John 10, *My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand*.

Or to say it another way, "Father knows best." Which brings us full circle to Story #4 on the subject of Divine Providence. The kingdom of God is like a medium sized congregation in a medium sized town full of folks who believe that no matter how overwhelming life gets, Jesus Christ is sitting at the right hand of His Father ruling all of heaven and earth on behalf

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of His Church. Their faith is based on arguments that go from the greater to the lesser. If God was able to create all of heaven and earth in six days, then certainly He is carrying out His plans to prosper and to heal and to teach His people through all the ups and downs of life. If God was willing not to spare His only Son on their behalf, then surely, He is able to graciously provide them with all gifts necessary for body and soul. The world likes to talk about being lucky or not being lucky. These folks prefer to talk about Divine Providence. And as often as they are able to keep in mind on the one hand what Mama said, that there'd be days like this, and on the other hand, that Father knows best, well then they are able to practice a long obedience in the same direction. In Jesus' Name. Amen