

St. James United Church of Christ
Havertown, PA
Preacher: Jenn Hayden
Sunday, October 6, 2019

At first, the pair of readings today don't have much in common. In fact, they almost seem like they have opposite messages. The first, from Psalms, says not to worry about the wicked, but instead to trust in God. He will provide, he will guide us and protect us, he'll pick us up when we've fallen down, he will give us our hearts' desire.

And then the second reading, from Matthew, Jesus tells righteous people that whenever they did anything for others – any time they helped the sick, the poor, the hungry or the thirsty – they were actually helping him. Any actions they did for the least important people, they did for him.

So in the first, God is doing all things for us. And in the second, we're doing all things for him. And when I started thinking about these two seemingly opposed ideas, a story came to mind, a joke, actually, that's a bit of a modern-day parable. And it goes like this.

A terrible storm came into a town and local officials sent out an emergency warning that the riverbanks would soon overflow and flood the nearby homes. They ordered everyone in the town to evacuate immediately.

Now there was a faithful, devout Christian man who heard the warning and decided to stay, saying to himself, "I will trust God and if I am in danger, then God will send a divine miracle to save me." I mean, this is exactly what he heard in the first reading: trust in the Lord and he will help you. Be patient and wait for the Lord to act. Right?

So the next-door neighbors came by his house and said to him, "We're leaving and there is room for you in our car, please come with us!" But the man declined. "I have faith in God. He will save me."

As the man stood on his porch watching the water rise up the steps, a man in a canoe paddled by and called to him, "Hurry and come into my canoe, the waters are rising quickly!" But the man again said, "I have faith in God. He will save me."

The floodwaters rose higher pouring water into his living room and the man had to retreat to the second floor. Still the waters continued to rise, and he had to escape out the window to his roof.

A police helicopter spotted him and dropped a rope ladder. A rescue officer came down the ladder and pleaded with the man, "Grab my hand and I will pull you up!" But the man STILL refused, saying "No thank you! I have faith in God. He will save me."

Shortly after, the house broke apart and the floodwaters swept the man away and he drowned.

When he got to Heaven, the man stood before God and said, "I put all of my faith in You. Why didn't You come and save me?"

And God said, "My Son, I sent you a warning. I sent you a car. I sent you a canoe. And I sent you a helicopter. What more were you looking for?"

Seen through the lens of this story, suddenly these two readings seem to hold a very different message and meaning. We're told to trust in God because he'll protect and guide us and help us up when we've fallen down, and also that when we help the least of our brothers and sisters, we help God. So is it possible that maybe, we are meant to be the carriers, the bringers of God's help to others? What if we are the conduit? Yes, God will protect his children – but maybe that's through OUR actions, WE bring his protection to others. Through our actions, we can help bring his comfort to others. Maybe we are the deliverymen, the distribution network of God's love, comfort, patience, and healing.

There's a term in storytelling – theatre, books, movies – called *deus ex machina*. It's a Latin term which is a translation from a Greek phrase meaning literally "a god from a machine". It came from ancient Greek and Roman drama, in which it was common practice to introduce a god at the end of a play to make everything right, unravel all the challenges from the plot and bring everything to a successful, tidy, happy conclusion. The origin of the phrase itself was that they used a type of crane to actually hang an actor representing the god over the stage, literally coming down to save the day.

I don't know about you, but I often find myself wishing for a real-life deus ex machina – some bright and shining moment where God swoops down from on high to resolve some drama in my life. I think we probably all have those moments where we wish for that. A cancer diagnosis. The grip of an addiction. A devastating financial blow. An abusive relationship.

If the first reading is right, and God will always protect and save us and lift us up, where is he? Where is our deus ex machina moment in these situations? Why aren't we seeing him working in our lives?

I think it's because the deus ex machina model is, like the dramatic plays of its origins, a myth. That's not always how God chooses to work. Like the parable of the man in the flood, I think sometimes we miss out on seeing God's work in our lives because we're looking for the wrong thing. We're looking for the heavenly, supernatural, over-the-top solution to our troubles – a winning lottery ticket to resolve our financial worries, an attractive, amazing partner to sweep us off our feet – or better yet, that amazing person with the winning lottery ticket in their back pocket!

I wonder how many of God's blessings we overlook, how many times he offers us help and we miss it, because it looks different than what we were hoping for. Being lonely and wishing for a romantic partner to show up could cause us to overlook the blessing of a new platonic friendship. Being sick and waiting for a miracle cure might cause us to not even notice the blessing of having caring, compassionate nurses and doctors doing all they can to provide us with comfort and health.

And on the flip side of it – how often do we miss opportunities to be the deliverers of God's love and care to others? We may not be able to serve as the deus ex machina in someone's life – but we can bring a meal to them when they're recovering from surgery, or send a card or even a text to share a loving word or quick prayer. We can make room in the car for one more passenger to hop in and escape the storm, we can paddle by in our boat and offer someone an escape from the floodwaters.

We can do these things and be the deliverers of God's help and compassion – and the best part is that we get a two-for-one deal! We're not just serving others in those moments, we're serving God as well. Because as he said in Matthew, "I tell you, whenever you did this for one of the least important of these followers of mine, you did it for me!"