

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
 East Moline, Illinois
 Pastor Becky Sherwood
July 27, 2014, 7th Sunday After Pentecost
 Psalm 105: 1-11, 45b, Romans 8:26-39
Which Way Should We Go...In 2020?

In the book *Alice in Wonderland*, Alice comes across the Cheshire Cat, grinning down at her from the branches of a tree.

Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?", (she asks)

"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the Cat.

"I don't much care where –" said Alice.

"Then it doesn't matter which way you go," said the Cat.

"– so long as I get *somewhere*," Alice added as an explanation.

"Oh, you're sure to do that," said the Cat, "if you only walk long enough."

Here in the middle of the middle of the world pandemic, the always changing news, and all that is going on in your life, and the lives of those you love,
 don't you feel a bit like Alice some days?
 Don't you find yourselves hoping beyond hope,
 that someone wise will be able to tell us where to go from here?
 Sometimes even the Cheshire Cats in our lives begin to look like they might have a
 good answer! 😊

There have been days in this past week that have left me feeling lost, and wondering where to go from here. At one level I dread turning on the news when I get up in the morning.

Yet I feel like I need to know what is going on as a world citizen.

I feel like I need to know what is going on as a person of faith,
 so I can pray in an informed way.

But at another level I feel like I can't take one more news report Covid infections and deaths, shootings, injustice, and riots.

Oh, and then of course there is the full steam ahead of the Presidential election. And no matter what you are thinking about November, the nightly conventions are wearying to say the least.

And then Alice's question echoes in my head:

Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?", (she asks)

"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the Cat.

I do care where we end up, and yet I don't know where to go with the local, national and world news,

and I often don't know what to pray for, because it is all so overwhelming.

But still I feel called to care and to pray.

But it hurts to care for a hurting world.

And if we enter into that pain, if we let it get close to us, then sooner or later that hard question is going to arise. The question many pastors dread, and many pastors ask themselves:

"Where is God?" Where is God in this suffering? Where is God in this broken, fractured world? Where is God in this world pandemic?"

And if you are like me, you don't just ask "Where is God?" when you listen to the news. That question also comes up in our own personal journeys, and in the journeys of those we love.

In fact, I'm sure many of us have come into worship this morning,
 with our heads and hearts focused on our own life stories and the stories of those we love.
 And because of those stories, because of our own grief and sadness,
 because of our own fears and worries,
 because of our own uncertainties,
 we come into worship this morning wondering if God will speak to the questions,
 and the pain and the sorrows of our hearts.

So, we ask the questions for ourselves, and for those we love, and for our world:
 "Where is God?" Where is God in this suffering? Where is God in this broken, fractured
 world? Where is God in this world pandemic?"
 It feels like we've hit a dead-end some days doesn't it?

This feeling of being stuck, and uncertain, and wondering where we are going, reminded me of
 a story I told you years ago, and want to tell you again.
 I'm finding during this world pandemic that I'm returning to life lessons I've learned in the past,
 and now I'm learning from them in new ways.
 This experience I want to tell you about taught me then, and teaches me now that
 God sees our lives and experiences
 from a different perspective than our own.

The summer of 1982 I was a Youth Pastor on the Oregon Coast. Near the end of the summer
 the minister, Bruce, and I took a small group of High Schoolers on a week-long backpacking trip in the
 Cascade Mountains of central Oregon.

If you know that part of Oregon, we were hiking in the 3-Sisters part of the Cascade Range.
 We'd gone off-trail for a day and a half and were seeking to reconnect with the Pacific Crest Trail we'd
 started out on, which is the established hiking trail that runs from Canada to Mexico through the states
 of Washington, Oregon and California.

We weren't sure if we'd actually reconnected to the Pacific Crest Trail on that hot August day as
 we entered a deep canyon. Remember this was pre-GPS days, we had a map and a compass and that
 was it.

As the canyon walls drew closer and closer,
 the tree cover grew less and less,
 and the heat of the day was really beating down on us, the heat bouncing off the canyon walls.

After several hours of hiking we were 2 tired adults and 6 cranky high schoolers. We were
 getting low on water and the canyon looked like it was dead-ending up ahead of us. The thought of
 hiking hours back out of that canyon in the late afternoon sun had all of us really unhappy with our
 reality.

So, we sat down for a snack break, a break from each other, and Bruce and I began to strategize
 what we were going to do next. One of the girls called to us from what she thought might be a path
 that went up the canyon wall, saying hopefully that maybe there was a way to get out we didn't know
 about.

So, we all put our packs back on and joined her, only to see that the end of the path she'd found
 ended in brush about thirty feet above us up the canyon wall.
 More cranky grumbling from everyone involved.

But this young woman had been the optimist of the whole trip, and she went to where the trail ended and shouted back to us to come and see, because the path continued. We once again joined her and came to the turning in the path, only to see it end about 50 yards above us.

It took two or three more turnings of the path, with the rest of us being convinced every time that she was wrong, for the mood of the whole group to change. Suddenly we were all hopeful, even though it seemed like the path ended at each turning of the switchbacks.

It took us about 40 more minutes to hike the hundreds of feet up out of the canyon. We really were not sure we were going to make it until we reached the rim of the canyon. The kids and the pastor kept on walking. But I stopped and looked down over the edge. I'll never forget what I saw.

From that perspective it was easy to see the carefully carved path that zigged and zagged its way up the canyon wall. It was a clear uninterrupted pathway.

In all that these days are holding, we may not be able to see where to go. There definitely is no clear pathway. But this morning's reading from Romans calls to us to remember who is on the pathway with us. We often don't see the path, until we are farther along it looking back.

This morning I want to invite us to stop where we are right now today, with all that our lives are holding, and look back at this passage from Romans and see God's pathway and God's love for us there.

Because that same pathway is in front of us as well.

I think the Alice in Wonderland quote kept coming to me at the beginning of this week, because too often we wander about, caught up in our news, our friend's news, our family's news, and the country's and the world's news, without paying attention to where we are going with that news.

And when we don't pay attention to where we are going,
 or we aren't even sure where we are going,
 then the news,
 and our own concerns and worries,
 and even our own sorrows and grief become the center of our world,
 and Jesus gets pushed off to the side of the path.

When we aren't focused first on Jesus as the center of our world, then it's easy to forget that there is actually Good News in our world.

The Good News that we are given in Jesus isn't going to take away what is happening in the world,
 it isn't going to stop all that is happening in our life and the lives of those we love,
 but that love of Jesus is strong enough to hold onto us and support us as we live our lives in these days.

This morning's passage from Romans would take a 15-week sermon series to even begin to talk about everything that is in these verses. But as we look back at it, I want to focus on a three of its Good News reminders, so we can walk forward from this morning's sermon holding on to these powerful truths.

The first part of the Good News that we find in this morning's reading is that we are not the first people who don't even know what to pray sometimes. We are not the first ones to be overwhelmed by the suffering of the world, or the suffering in our lives.

Paul, and the Christians he wrote to in Rome, may have lived in a very different time in history, but they too were overwhelmed by the news of their world,

and overwhelmed by how to be people of faith in the midst of all that was happening to them, and overwhelmed with their own personal sorrows and losses and suffering.

Paul gave them a picture of prayer that I have held onto for many years. This is the good news:

when we don't know how to pray,
or what to pray,
or even if we can pray at all,
God steps in.

When we don't know how to pray Paul teaches us that God's Holy Spirit prays for us with "sighs too deep for words." Or as the old King James Version put it: "the Holy Spirit prays for us with groans too deep for words."

What a relief that
when we don't know how to pray,
when we don't know what to pray,
when we can't even pray,
God's Spirit prays for us.

Sometimes only the Holy Spirit can put into words, the sighs and groans of our sorrows, our fears, our worries and uncertainties, and our longings for healing and for help.

The next piece of Good News in this passage is that as we seek to be followers of Jesus, God has chosen us and is guiding us to be those followers. We get so tangled up in the word "predestination" that shows up in these verses that we lose sight of the Good News that God has chosen us, called us by name, and is guiding our steps.

That is the grace and gift of predestination, we are chosen by God.

Listen to a few of these verse in the Message translation:

"God knew what God was doing from the very beginning...After God made that decision of what God's children should be like, God followed it up by calling people by name. After God called them by name, God set them on a solid basis with God's self. And then, after getting them established, God stayed with them to the end, gloriously completing what God had begun. So, what do you think? With God on our side like this, how can we lose? If God didn't hesitate to put everything on the line for us, embracing our condition and exposing God's self to the worst by sending God's own Son, is there anything else God wouldn't gladly and freely do for us?"

Even when our vision isn't clear, this passage reminds us that God's vision is clear. God will not leave us. God walks with us. God sees the zig zag pathways up the canyon walls even before we find them.

The third piece of Good News for us to carry with us on the pathways of these days comes from the final verses of Romans 8, with their powerful promise that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

We often read these words at funerals, but I want us to take the advice of one of my colleagues who challenges us to hold onto these words every day

(The Rev. David Shearman, Midrash "Opening Comments for Sunday

July 27 2014 which is the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost. Proper 12. Year A.", posted 7-20-14)

I encourage you to make a copy verses 37-39, or even more of Romans 8, in whichever translation speaks to you, and carry them with you in your purse or wallet, or put them in a place in your house where you will see them.

These are words for us when we feel a bit like Alice, not really sure where to go, and we find we are taking advice from the Cheshire cats in our lives instead of God,
 These are words for us when we feel overwhelmed by the world's news or our own news and wonder where God has gone.

These are Good News words for us when we need to be reminded that even when all evidence seems to point to the contrary, and we can't see the path ahead,
 God is always with us.

Our final Good News message is this: Nothing, nothing in heaven or on the earth, can ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

I invite you to hear these words, reading once more from the Message translation:

*“Do you think anyone is going to be able to drive a wedge between us and Christ's love for us?
 There is no way!*

Not trouble, not hard times, not hatred, not hunger, not homelessness, not bullying threats, not backstabbing, not even the worst sins listed in Scripture: ...

None of this fazes us because Jesus loves us.

I'm absolutely convinced that nothing - nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, high or low, thinkable or unthinkable –

*absolutely nothing can get between us and God's love
 because of the way that Jesus our Master has embraced us.”*

We ask the questions: “Where is God?” Where is God in this suffering? Where is God in this broken fractured world? Where is God in this world pandemic?”

And Paul shows us the true pathway in Romans 8:

God is right here, here on the path with us.

God is right here,
 praying for us when we can't pray.

God is right here,
 calling us by name, because from the beginning of time God has always known and loved each one of us.

God is right here,
 sending us Jesus over and over again,
 so that nothing will ever separate us from the love of God that is for us
 in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.