

Is God in Control?

Today we continue in our sermon series, Christian questions with more than one answer. Some of our questions are worth asking not because of the answer that they prompt, but because there is learning to be found in the pondering and in the wrestling. There are some questions for which no answer will satisfy us, and for which no answer can be fully known. And yet in asking them, we struggle towards faithfulness in a world that offers very few clear answers. Today our question is “Is God in control?”

Our second scripture reading comes from Romans 8:18-25, 28-30. You can follow along on page 919 of your pew Bibles. Listen now for a word from God.

¹⁸ I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God, ²⁰ for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from its enslavement to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²² We know that the whole creation has been groaning together as it suffers together the pains of labor, ²³ and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope, for who hopes for what one already sees? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

²⁸ We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. ³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

This past spring at our men’s retreat in Montreat, our keynote speaker, Lucas Jones, had us participate in an icebreaker together. He had us divide ourselves into three different groups, based on what we believe.

Group number 1, you believe that life is like a motorboat, and God is the captain. God is at the helm of the boat, steering the wheel, whatever waves or weather may come the way, God is able to steer the boat in any direction God chooses.

Group number 2: you believe that life is like a sailboat, and God is the wind. God can blow us in a particular direction, can aid us or inhibit us, but ultimately it is up to us to lift our sails, to tack and jibe to steer the boat in response to the way God moves.

Group number 3, life is like a canoe, and God is in the boat with us, God has no control over the weather or the waves, or even direct control over the direction of the boat. We help steer the boat and God is there to comfort, to support, to be present, but God can't change what happens.

Do you know which of those three groups you would be in? I won't ask you to get out of your seat, but just imagine, which of those three would you gravitate to? Do you believe that God has absolute control in the world, that everything that happens in our lives is part of God's will? Do you believe that God is a force that moves in the world (a wind that blows), and that we have the opportunity to respond, to participate, and even to resist the way that God moves? Or do you believe that God accompanies us through whatever life throws our way. God doesn't orchestrate what happens in our lives, but nevertheless God is a constant companion and source of comfort through the challenges we face.

As you might imagine, rather than three clearly defined, distinct groups, the men on the retreat this past spring ended up with more of a jagged clumpy line that stretched from one end of the room to the other. Some folks gathered closely to one side or another, but most of us, somewhere in between. For many of us, the answer to the question, "is God in control?" is more complex than a simple yes or no answer.

I'll admit, I would love to believe in a God that has absolute control in the world; a God who, like that old children's song goes, has got the whole world in his hands. That image of God tenderly, gently holding the world is a profoundly comforting image. Especially in times when the circumstances of our lives are so wildly out of our control, to put our trust in God's hands, to relinquish any illusions

of control that we might have, and to surrender to the mercy of almighty God is a welcome and needed relief.

It is this kind of trust in a powerful and active God that leads the psalmist to pray, saying “the Lord is my refuge, a very present help in trouble.” Scholars suggest that the psalm may have been written during a time when the Kingdom of Judea was facing an existential military threat. Barricaded in the city, prepared for battle, fearful of the imminent violence, the psalmist is confronted with his own and powerlessness in the face of danger, and can’t help but call upon God for protection. It is by placing his trust in God that he finds the courage not to be afraid. “Therefore, we will not fear,” the psalmist says, “though the Earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea, though the waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult.” Placing our trust in God helps us quiet our fears, and to make it through all the earth changing, water roaring, mountain shaking moments of our lives.

But even this doesn’t paint a complete picture of God’s power and God’s activity in the world. We know there are times in our lives, when we cry out to God, and God does not intervene. When we pray, and put our trust in God, when we are doing all that we can to swim upstream against the tide of injustice, and still, nothing seems to get any better. In those moments, the question of “Is God in control” becomes much harder to answer.

In the mid-1970’s American author Annie Dillard spent 2 years on an island in the Puget sound, off the coast of Washington State. There, in a little one-bedroom house at the edge of the world, accompanied by her cat and the unexpected companionship of a spider in the corner of the room, she began to write about her questions, about life and death, God, time and memory, beauty and grace, and more. She wrote a book entitled *Holy the Firm*. In the book she describes an experience worshipping in a nearby congregation. She writes,

“The minister is a Congregationalist and wears a white shirt. The man knows God. Once, in the middle of the long pastoral prayer of intercession for the whole world---for the gift of wisdom to its leaders, for hope and mercy to the grieving and pained, succor to the oppressed, and God's grace to all---in the middle of this he stopped, and burst out, "Lord, we bring you

these same petitions every week." After a shocked pause, he continued reading the prayer."

Then she adds, "Because of this, I like him very much."

This short vignette offers us a window into the frustrations of our everyday faith. It is raw and honest portrait of the faithful longing to see God's justice lived out. We bring the same petitions to God each week, for justice, for peace, for healing, and while we know that God does not have to answer to our every request, our hearts ache as we find ourselves humbly, desperately wondering "when will God, finally, answer our prayer?"

Into this place of deep frustration and suffering, that Paul's letter to the Romans speaks a word of unexpected truth. The people of the early church in Rome were at the very heart of the Roman Empire, and intimately familiar with its violence, its poverty, its persecution of early Christians, and *its* stretching control. They wondered; how do we reconcile this suffering all around us with our faith in Jesus Christ, with our trust in a God who has the power to change it all. I imagine, like that pastor all those years ago, they too thought, God bring the same petitions to you every week!

What is Paul's response to the question of suffering? Paul begins to paint a picture of the redemption that God promises. Creation itself will be set free from its futility toward freedom, and in this promise we can have hope. We hope in a glory that is yet to be revealed. Hope in God's promised world, which will be so beautiful, that it cannot even be compared to the sufferings of the current day. Hope in what we do not see, in what we cannot know. Hope that ultimately God will be our salvation.

And at the very center of that hope are the Children of God. God's power is not like the control of the Roman empire, sweeping in, crushing all resistance. God's power invites our participation as the Children of God, conformed to the image of Christ, to be the hope of the world. *All of creation* Paul says, is waiting with eager longing for the revealing of the Children of God. Creation, crying out in labor pains is longing for you and me. God has called us to be that glorious of hope of a world crying out in pain.

In 1944 J.R.R. Tolkien, wrote a letter to his son, Christopher Tolkien, who at the time was training in South Africa to become a fighter pilot in the Air Force, and eventually to fly in World War II. Tolkien, deeply grieved by the horrors of the second world war in his lifetime, was writing to encourage and uplift his son in the face of peril.

In that letter, he describes his own heartache at the suffering caused by the war, saying “If anguish were visible, almost the whole of this benighted planet. Would be enveloped in a dense dark vapor, shrouded from the amazed visions of the heavens! And the products of it all will be mainly evil.” It is a breathtaking haunting description of the reality of wartime, but he does not end there. Compelled by his deep Catholic faith, he begins to turn toward hope. “All we do know, and that to a large extent by direct experience is that evil labors with vast power and perpetual success—in vain: preparing always only the soil for unexpected, good to sprout in.” Tolkien reminds his son that while it may seem like evil is winning out again and again, suffering growing, injustice prevailing, it is only so until that labors that evil is revealed to be in vain.

We cannot know the innerworkings of God’s control in the world, we do know this: Out of the evils of the world, God is preparing a garden to grow in the soil made fertile by suffering and heartache.

The question for us then, is not whether life is like a motorboat, a sailboat, or a canoe, and God, like a captain, a breeze, or a companion. The question for us is, “what will we plant in the garden God is tending.”