

## “Can I Trust God?”

*Deuteronomy 34:1-5, Revelation 22:1-5, Romans 8:28-30*

God's people have always had to wait. God called Abraham and his wife Sarah, and promised to give them many descendents and a land of their own; to make of them a great nation and to bless others through them. But this didn't happen quickly. It took years for them to even have one child of their own, and they never lived to see their descendants become a great nation or inherit the land God had promised. God's people also had to wait for hundreds of years to be delivered from slavery. We waited years for the Jesus, the Messiah to come. We still wait for the fulfillment of God's kingdom, for eternal life, and the elimination of suffering and death forever. It is hard to wait. This promised land is a destination that most of us long to reach, and for which we often do feel a measure of impatience – especially when terrible things happen in our personal lives, or in the world at large, like this past week's earthquake in Haiti. We look at the suffering in the world and ask, “Are we almost there?” Sometimes, we may compare our faith with the realities we experience and ask an even deeper question, “Can I trust God?” “Can I really trust God to bring something good out of all this? Will God ever fix things?” And that is the topic of today's message.

Since we are today honoring the memory of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., I'd like to pick up on a metaphor he used in one of his final speeches, and which is actually drawn from today's reading from the book of Deuteronomy. It is the metaphor of how life looks differently depending on your vantage point. When you are down in a valley, you can't see very far, but when you are on the mountaintop, you can see the big picture.

There's no question the most of us have **the view from the Valley**. We live in the valley of the physical world, bounded by our five senses and hemmed in by the limiting factors of our culture and education. Often times, this valley is for us the valley of the shadow of death. That is to say, we are immersed in the challenges, pain and loss of earthly life. We can't see the future, we can't see the deeper meaning of our actions, and we don't know for sure how God will work in our lives. But, even so, there are things we can see from the floor of the valley.

We can see **God's promise**. The Bible shows us that God is a God of promises. God makes sacred commitments to us. The ultimate vision of this promise is found in our reading from Revelation. John receives a vision from God of what life will be like when God's purposes are ultimately fulfilled. It's a symbolic vision filled with profound meaning. John sees a new world sustained by God's abundant life. This life is pictured as a crystal clear river flowing from the throne of God right through the center of God's city. Lining the banks of this life-giving river are multiple trees of life – the fruit of which stands for eternal life, and the leaves of which provide healing for all nations. There is nothing evil or painful in this new world. Instead it is a world of eternal joy and intimate fellowship with the God. This is the promise we receive and we can see it any time we pick up the Bible. Sometimes, we even get foretastes of its fulfillment. Maybe you've had a relationship that was damaged by some wrong-doing, but through forgiveness the relationship was restored. That is a foretaste of God's new world. Or maybe you've experienced healing from a disease, like one young man in my home church who was diagnosed with cancer that seemed likely to take his arm, if not his life. After much intense prayer on the part of the congregation, we received news that he had been healed and

that he was able to keep his arm. That was also a foretaste of God's promises fulfilled. The point is, we have God's promise that the things that hurt us and hold us down in this life will not always be so. We won't always hurt. We won't always struggle with depression or mental illness. We won't always be trapped by poverty or systems of oppression that are beyond our control. We won't always wrestle with addictions and compulsions. Ultimately, we will be healed and free and at one with God. From the floor of this valley, we can see this promise of God in scripture, and sometimes even get provisional glimpses of its fulfillment.

Life in the valley also allows us to know **God's presence**. In the story of Moses, we find God calling Moses to go to Egypt to lead his people out of slavery. Moses is reluctant to go, but God promises to be with him. And so Moses leads the Exodus from Egypt, and then leads the Israelites through the desert for forty years. It wasn't easy or pleasant. Through all that time, right up to the end of Moses' earthly life, God was with him. It was a relationship filled with questioning and struggles. Moses wasn't always happy with God's calling. But God never left Moses. And as the Bible continues, we find God promising to be with us too. Most notably, in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says, "I will be with you always, even to the end of time." Now, you may not always be aware of this presence. I know that I don't constantly walk around feeling God with me. Sometimes we will feel God near, and at other times we won't. A certain amount of trust is required here. It's like this: you see the sun during the day and enjoy it, but when the sun goes down, you don't fly into a panic believing the sun has abandoned you or no longer exists. It will be back the next morning. And so we go through phases of life when God feels near, and times when God doesn't feel far away. Frankly, in my experience, I tend to be most aware of God's presence during the times when I'm struggling. Sometimes I even see my struggles as a gift from God, because they keep pushing me to turn to God and remind me of God's presence. This may not be how it works for you. You might experience God's presence most when all is well and you are feeling blessed. Either way, the truth is that God has promised to be with us always. God goes with us, no matter how we feel, or how aware we may be of it at any given time.

Finally, we can see **God's providence**. That is, we can sometimes see how God has been at work in our lives. This often happens in ways that we would never have imagined while events were unfolding, but which in retrospect have clear signs of God's providential involvement. I think this is the kind of experience Paul is referring to in Romans when he says, "all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose." Paul was able to look back on his life and remember all the terrible, destructive things he had done to God's people. And yet, with the gift of hindsight, he could see how God turned even his greatest evil around and great good through him too. This is why Paul so often marvels at God's grace shown to him, and calls himself, "The Chief of Sinners."

As a rule, the last time you want to share this scripture about God working all things for good is when someone is going through some horrific personal tragedy. For one thing, it implies that God caused the bad thing to happen in order to do some good thing. Let's be clear, God never does evil. Not even for a good cause. To try to comfort someone in their grief and suffering with the idea that God is causing it to bless them in some obscure, invisible way, is not helpful. I suspect it may be blasphemy. What I think Paul was really trying to say is that, no matter what wrong turns we take; no matter what bad things happen; no matter how tragic our circumstances; God never lets go of us. God never gives up on us. God can still work in

our lives, even after we've been through horrible pain and loss. God can still do something good with us. That doesn't mean it is good that you suffered, or good that a tragedy occurred. But, taking the raw materials of your experience, God can still find ways to bless you and bless others through you. I've experienced this to be true in my life, and I know many others here have as well.

Ultimately, though, the view from the valley is limited. We can see God's promises, feel God's presence, and rely on God's providence. But this doesn't let us see the promised land. That comes in **the view from the mountaintop**. Shortly before his death, God takes Moses up on top of the mountain and shows him the promised land toward which he had been leading the people for over forty years. Finally, he got to see it first hand. The great irony, of course, is that Moses never got to cross the Jordan and enter this earthly promised land. Instead, he entered God's eternal promised land directly. But before he went onto paradise, he received the assurance that God's people had arrived at their destination, and that all would be as it should be. A similar thing happened for Martin Luther King, Jr. In the days before his assassination, he gave a speech in which he said this...

*Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.*

We walk through the valley of this life relying on God's promises, presence and providence. Sometimes, that doesn't feel like enough, and we yearn for that mountaintop vision of the promised land of God's freedom, healing, equality and peace. Sometimes, we do get that vision. But whether we do or not, the good news of the Bible and Christian experience is that God can be trusted. The promised land does exist, and we will get there – perhaps even in some provisional ways during this lifetime – and certainly, when all creation is brought to fulfillment, and we enter the joy of God's realm. God has made this promise, and God can be trusted to bring it to pass, no matter what life may throw at us!