

“Where is God in All of This? Part One”

By Steve Ramer, Pastor

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Scripture

Luke 22:14-20 When the hour came, he took his place at the table, and the apostles with him. He said to them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you, I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, "Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood."

Sermon

For more than six months now, we have been struggling to figure out how to live with Covid-19.

The official death toll is inching closer and closer to 200,000 and some models are predicting that total deaths will double before it's all over. The tracking of deaths, new cases and the status of a possible vaccine are tracked daily in our media.

We are constantly reminded of those whom we have lost and must pray constantly for the victims.

And though we may experience some psychic relief when we hear that the pandemic is declining or even when it is merely plateauing, we also know that the end is not even in sight yet.

Will things get better, will they get worse? We simply do not know. We desperately want life to get back to normal but we also know that it will be a “new normal,” which will be out of our control.

But we humans have confronted many crises throughout our existence. Some actually bigger threats than what we are facing now.

But this one is very different.

In most crises in the early moments we get through by reacting, by doing, by responding to the needs and not a lot of thinking.

We literally start picking up the pieces and then quickly begin to start rebuilding following the great fire or storm.

We rally to get supplies to those who need them most.

The gravity of what just happened can be put off and we can deal later with some of the big theological or philosophical questions.

This time, however we must isolate, distance, and avoid close sustained contact with others. Many of us may actually have more time on our hands to consider our situation and to think and process.

As the gravity of the situation begins to sink in, our minds and hearts begins to fill with many difficult questions.
“Why?! Why God, could you let this happen?”
“How could you let this happen especially to those who are already poor and who have already suffered so much?”
“Why can’t you spare the most vulnerable? Do you care?”
“Where are you anyway when we really need you?”

Now to be sure these are hard, painful and even agonizing questions. But they are, I believe, important questions - even necessary questions for those of us who live by faith.

To question God is okay, it’s natural and I actually think it should be encouraged.

For instance, look at the Psalms, it seems as if nearly each one ricochets back and forth from singing the praises of Yahweh’s great deeds at one moment, to deep despair, feelings of abandonment or even angry accusations of God’s indifference in the next.

But I also wonder, if we are maybe asking the wrong questions?

To use the old visual - when you are pointing your finger to blame someone else, you are also simultaneously, pointing at least three fingers back at yourself and so perhaps an additional question should be included; “and where am I?”

To accuse God of malfeasance is permissible. Many great and glorious biblical characters did and managed to get away with it. I also think that God’s ego can handle it and I’ve read in the Bible, that God’s pretty patient, kind and forgiving. But the only honest way to question God must also turn the same hard questions back on us.

Now if my faith is my core - or that which is the most solid thing in my life, then faith must be given a crucial role not only to give me hope during moments of despair but it must also inform how I respond both during and after the storms of life are over.

But Christian faith also clearly challenges us to not only believe certain core truths to be true, but to act on them as if we really do believe them to be true.

And faith, in my experience at least,
doesn't always lead me to the answers I'm expecting.
And I don't know about you, but quite often it seems,
that some questions are often answered with even more questions.

Now let me preface what I am about to say: I do not think
that it is always appropriate to rush folks into looking for
"silver linings," in fact I really hate it when others try to cheer me up
by pointing out all the benefits that can result from the crisis.

Of course beautiful flowers will rise from the horse****,
but it still stinks and I don't want to step in it all the time!
Will those of us who survive Covid-19 learn new and positive things?
Well I sure hope so! Survival depends on it!

But as we I think of and pray for those who are suffering, we can also
keep our hearts and minds open to other questionable options.
"Can new life be resurrected from death?"
"Can that which has been broken and destroyed
be made whole or rise again?"
"Can sadness and despair be transformed into joy and compassion
and can sorrow give way to singing and dancing?"

To these questions our holy scriptures and our faith tradition
responds with a resounding yes!
With the most powerful expression of this affirmation
expressed in our most universal and most common ritual.

Mennonites simply call it communion and we do it to remember Jesus.
What we mean by "remember" is that in this celebration
we recall everything that Jesus did and said in his life, as well as
what occurred through his suffering and in his death.

We, humbly of course, equate remembrance with following
his teachings and example in our day to day lives.

In the breaking of bread we remembering that his body was broken
just as millions of bodies are being broken right now
because of the global Covid pandemic.
Because of Jesus' life, suffering and death our lives will never be the same.

Because of Jesus' life, suffering and death he has taken on that
which is universally shared by humanity.
In his willingness to be broken, our now shared broken bodies
of all humanity can now actually heal!

And we also drink from the same cup, recalling that Jesus
actually did bleed as he suffered and then died.

He tells us however that this is a new cup called forgiveness,
the precursor for restored familial relationships not only
between us and God but even with each other.

And as I experience forgiveness, I then can begin to forgive myself and if
I can do that, maybe I can learn to forgive others - even my enemies.
In recalling this last meal Jesus had with his friends,
we also remember the promise that Jesus is Emanuel - "God with us."
We therefore can say with confidence, that God is present
and so also suffers with those who are sick and dying.

God is with those who have lost their jobs and homes.
God is with each one who must now grieve the loss of family
and friends as they must now pick up what is left
of their shattered lives and move on.

God is with those whose fears of the future cause them distress
and we know that God is with all who serve tirelessly
and at great risk to bring healing to the sick and dying.

So there are many questions that remain for those of us
who have survived thus far

Allow me to summarize as I close this morning.
"Where is God in all of this?" God is with us!

God is in the ICU and the nursing homes so that no one actually dies alone.
In fact God is cradling them within loving arms!
God is with the family and friends who grieve not only their loss
but their guilt of physical absence from their loved ones.
And we know that God is with the nurses, doctors and other health care
workers who work tirelessly at the risk of their own health.

But as I mentioned earlier we must also ask, "Where am I?"
Am I feeling safe and secure in the arms of a loving God?
Do you feel God's love and forgiveness?
Are you living as if you do truly believe it?
Are you willing to be transformed by God's resurrection power
where despair gives way to hope and a beloved community
can rise from those old bones of indifference?

Do you want to turn distrust and indifference into a fountain of compassion?
What will you do with your legitimate fears of getting sick,
or losing your job and maybe your homes or someone you love?

Our world certainly needs our prayers and tons of PPE.
But what it doesn't need is our lack of faith or hope,
and especially our short attention spans.

They need us to live out our faith as if we really believe
what we say we believe is true.

Our sacred scriptural story of resurrection is prefaced first by suffering and then death.

Our world is actually on the threshold of a new way of being and like so many babies, we are experiencing the pains of birth.

If we fear it into being, that will be even more disasterous. But if we “hope it into being,” and nurture it with persistent love, the potential for a much brighter future will be better.

God is waiting and will be with us and will take part in that future regardless of which path we end up choosing. However, I think we all know which of these paths God is hoping that we will choose this time.

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