

Daily Devotional Guide

Monday – Today read Romans 8:18-23. These verses remind us that the adversity we face in this life is temporary. When we face adversity of any kind, we do “groan” and “long” for life as it should be. This is the Holy Spirit in us giving testimony to the great day when the Kingdom of God is fully established and trouble will be no more. Trouble will not last forever, but God will. Take comfort in that today.

Tuesday - Read Romans 8:26-27. This text brings great encouragement to us when we face adversity. First, the implication is that our first response to adversity is prayer. There is power in prayer. Second, the Holy Spirit understands us and our circumstances and is there to help us pray for what we need. Are you feeling overwhelmed? Try prayer today. The Spirit is there to help.

Wednesday – Read Romans 8:28. This is perhaps the most important verse we can meditate on when we face trouble in life. The promise given here is that pain and trouble are never the will of God, but God can and will use our adversity for a good purpose. We see this throughout scripture – God taking a bad situation and using it for good. This is what Paul means later in this text when he says we are “more than conquerors” (Romans 8:37). With God’s help, we not only can cope with adversity but we can turn our trouble into triumph. There will always be a rainbow!

Thursday – Read Romans 8:31-35. Whatever trouble you face today, know that you do not face it alone. God is with you every step of the way, willing to offer strength and guidance if you will allow it. God is FOR you, not against you. Reflect on this truth today.

Friday – Read Romans 8:37-39. Paul puts an exclamation point on this powerful chapter in Romans by reminding us that there is no power in the universe strong enough to separate us from the love and power of God. Not even death can separate us from God. The battle has been won. God is the victor. You can face adversity unafraid.



PASADENA COMMUNITY CHURCH

a United Methodist Congregation

227 - 70th Street South ~ St Petersburg, FL 33707
(727) 381-2499 email: pasadena@pccumc.org
www.pasadenacommunitychurch.org

Pasadena Community Church

Always Look for the Rainbow

~ Adversity ~

Sunday, January 8, 2012

Sermon by: Dr. Charley Reeb, Senior Pastor

Scripture Lesson: Romans 8: 18-39

In the Bible we see that a rainbow is a sign of God’s presence and power in the midst of the storm. Noah saw one. Ezekiel saw one. And John in Revelation saw one. How do we find God’s rainbow in our storms? Read on!

I like the story about the first year seminary student who had a tendency to fall asleep in her basic theology class. The professor noticed it and was not too happy about it.

One day he noticed her drifting off to sleep and decided that he would catch her in the act. The professor had the habit of asking big theological questions in class. One afternoon the professor asked the question, "Why does God allow suffering in life?"

The professor turned to the sleeping student and asked, "Can you answer that question for us?" The student immediately awoke. She did not hear the full question, so she tried to fake it. She wiped her eyes and replied, "Professor, I did know the answer, but I forgot it."

The professor turned to the rest of the class with a sad look on his face and said, "Class, please sit still, for this is a sad moment in the history of human thought. Mark this day on your calendars. Since the beginning of time only two people have known the answer to the question I asked today. Jesus knew but did not choose to tell us. The other is this first year theological student, and she has just forgotten the answer." I doubt she ever fell asleep in that class again!

Well, we have all asked the question, haven’t we? It comes in many forms. “Why me? Why am I going through this? What have I done to God? Why would God allow this to happen? Am I being punished? Is God trying to teach me a lesson? How could a good God permit this tragedy to happen?” It is called the theodicy question, and it has been asked by all of us. In fact, the theodicy question is the one theological question most people struggle with the most.

Since we are so desperate to find an answer to this question, many people have offered answers that are less than adequate. How many of you have ever heard this one: “Everything happens for a reason”? Don’t you love

it when someone comes up to you and says that?

What am I about to say may offend some people but not everything that happens to us happens for a reason. Many people like to make this statement because they deeply desire some sense of control in their lives and they don’t want life to become messy. Some people offer these words when seeking to comfort someone in crisis. They have good intentions but they have not really thought through what they have said.

The God I know does not plan and plot tragedies, crisis and suffering. Sometimes bad things happen to us because of the bad choices of others. Sometimes bad things happen to us because of our own bad choices. Sometimes bad things happen for no other reason than because we live in an evil, sinful, and imperfect world.

Here is another popular response to the theodicy question: “God must be testing you.” How many of you have ever heard that one? We have to be careful with this one. Although I would not deny there are particular moments in our lives when God may be testing us to help us grow in our walk with him, not every difficulty we experience in life is a test from God. Many see God as someone who enjoys throwing a pop-quiz our way just to see if we make the grade.

We cannot affirm that an innocent child was killed because God wanted to test the parents or “God needed another angel in heaven.” Mercy! We cannot affirm that God plotted 9/11 because he wanted to test our country! We don’t always know why awful things happen. We don’t always know why natural disasters occur, snuffing out the lives of others. But the God revealed in Jesus Christ would not bring about such things in order to put a “pass” or “fail” sign on someone.

Let me get to the root of some bad theology that goes along with many of the things we hear about God and adversity. Many have this notion that God has predetermined everything. We are the puppets and God is manipulating the strings. We just go by the script. Everything that happens, even tragedy and difficulty, has been scripted by God. Don’t question the script. Don’t resist it. Just go along with it.

Now, this sounds convenient and clean. It doesn't sound messy. And I guess there are some folks who find a bit of comfort from such misguided theology. But it is simply not true. The Bible clearly teaches that God has given us free will. We have a choice. God does not want robots who are programmed to love him. God wants us to choose to love him. God wants us to learn and grow and evolve. God wants us to experiment and be creative. God wants us to be in a cooperative relationship with him as we learn the joy that comes with gaining wisdom and maturing. This is why God has allowed us to fill in the blanks of our lives.

Does this mean God is not involved or does not have a will for us? No, it means God works in relationship with us, guiding us and empowering us to make the right choices. But God does not make the decisions for us. There is an old quote by Augustine: "Without God, we cannot; without us, God will not."

Some of you may be wondering, "Well, what does the Bible really say about adversity, tragedy, and difficulty? Does the Bible have an answer to the theodicy question? And I am not talking about the result of bad choices. I'm talking about the tragedies and atrocities that occur in life that do not seem to have a direct cause." Unfortunately, the Bible does not give a satisfying answer to the theodicy question. The Bible is filled with folks asking the question, but the Bible never really answers the question. This side of heaven we will not know why we face adversity in life. When the Kingdom of God is fully established on earth and we are renewed and restored all of our questions will be answered and all the mysteries will be solved. We long and pray for that day.

So, what do we do this side of heaven when we are faced with adversity? Well, the Bible promises us three things we can hold on to when faced with difficulty in life – God will be with us in it; God will empower us to face it; God will give us victory through it. In other words, God always has a rainbow for us in the storms of life. The adversity we face in life is not God's will, but God has a will in our adversity.

So, if you are dealing with adversity today you have a choice. You can choose to look for God's rainbow in the midst of your storm or you can choose to see the dark clouds around you. It is your choice. Now, guess which choice God is encouraging you to make.

Victor Frankl was a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp. He wrote a profound book called *Man's Search for Meaning*. In that book he writes, **"Everything can be taken from a man but one thing; the last of all human freedoms, the freedom to choose. Every person can choose how they will face the troubles of life. We have the power to choose our attitude in any given set of circumstances."** Later, Frankl states, **"If anyone has a why to live--they can endure any how!"**

The Rainbow of Strength and Character

That sounds Pollyanna, doesn't it? Perhaps you

are thinking, "Well, Charley, I have all the character I want! I am a character." Before you tune out this rainbow let me ask you this: How have you gained wisdom in your life so far? My guess is that your strength, character and wisdom have not come through the good times but through the difficult times. There is no way that human beings can grow without some adversity in life.

Many years ago one of the greatest preachers of Methodism, Dr. Ralph Sockman, said, "In life there are three types of troubles: The troubles we can avoid. The troubles we cannot avoid. The troubles we must not avoid." That last type of trouble implies that some adversity God wants us to experience.

This is what the writer of James had in mind when he wrote, "Consider it pure joy when you face trials of many kinds because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking in anything" (James 1:2-4).

What is this passage telling us? Muscles never grow and develop unless they are pushing against some resistance. Babies must go through the struggle of crawling and then getting up and falling down before they can walk. Some adversity is necessary for growth.

One of my favorite stories illustrating this truth is about English Botanist Alfred Russell Wallace. This is one of those stories that people hear fresh every time it is told.

One day in his laboratory Wallace was observing an Emperor butterfly seeking to get free from its cocoon. The scientist felt sorry for the butterfly because it was going through a long, painful struggle to get free. He wondered, "What would happen if I assisted in the process?" And so he took his scalpel and he cut down the length of the cocoon. He watched to see what would happen, and these are his exact words:

"The butterfly emerged from the cocoon, spread its wings, drooped perceptibly - and died."

I like how Arthur Caliendo interprets this illustration: "You see, that butterfly needed the struggle. It needed the pain, all that intense work. Otherwise, the juices would not be distributed into every square millimeter of its large, beautiful wings. Without all the pain, there would be no beauty, no color, no character, no life. Struggle and pain are necessary to create a beautiful, living creature."

We need struggle in order to grow. We need adversity in order to become strong and beautiful. Many people resist this truth. When trouble comes, they run away from it or deny it is there. They rail against it. They never give themselves the opportunity to grow from it. This is why there are some folks who never grow and remain dysfunctional their entire lives.

Recently, someone sent me an email message by Pauline Victoria. It is worth sharing with you. She writes, "The question is: *Have you ever asked God, 'Why me?'*" The simple answer is 'Yes.' In times of anger, pain and

frustration, I turned to God and asked, 'Why me?' What I discovered is that the very source I directed my anger to was the very source of my comfort. An answer to my question was revealed. God made me understand that my pain was not in vain and the question was turned back to me, 'Why YOU, Pauline?' The challenges we face are not tests administered by God. Our challenges are opportunities for us to discover more of our strength, courage and compassion. Our challenges are growing pains revealing what is within. As you encounter challenges in your life, ask, 'Why me? What is it about me that is strong and brave that I can over-come this?'"

The Rainbow of Opportunity

The word "crisis" in Chinese has two characters – one represents danger and the other opportunity. I like that. I believe that in every adversity there is opportunity.

I love the story Zig Ziglar tells about the General who found himself completely surrounded by enemy troops. Instead of panicking or surrendering, he simply turned to his soldiers and said, "Men, for the first time in the history of this military campaign, we are in position to attack the enemy in all directions!"

I love that attitude. Did you know it is biblical? Listen to what the Apostle Paul says in Romans 8:28 – "And we know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to His purpose." This means that the adversity we face is not God's will, but God will produce something good from it. Look at Romans 8:37 – "In all things we are *more than conquerors* through him who loved us." Look at that phrase "More than conquerors." It means that with the help of God we don't just survive the storms of life; we have victory through them!

Over and over again in the Bible we see God turning trouble into triumph! When evil attacks with resistance, God uses it to build strength. When evil attacks with pain, God uses it to build compassion. When evil attacks with death, God finds a way to life! In every storm of life there is God's rainbow of opportunity.

I read recently that the sound of a violin is determined by the kind of wood it is made of. Experts say that the best wood available today for making violins is found in trees precariously positioned on the highest mountain ranges. In the United States, craftsmen will make the dangerous trek up the Rockies, 12,000 feet above sea level, just to obtain wood to make violins.

These poor trees look pathetic. The severe climate does not allow their bark to grow. Their branches all point one way because of the fierce winds that blow. In order to survive, these trees must live on their knees. However, these trees are made up of the most resonant wood to make the best violins. Their struggle and perseverance produces the most beautiful music.

If I have heard it once I have heard hundreds of times – people sharing with me that the most difficult circumstances in their lives produced the best

opportunities. God used their adversity for good.

Whatever the adversity you face today, know that God has a rainbow of opportunity for you. Just be open to it. Ask God to reveal it to you.

The Rainbow of God's Abiding Presence

The truth is that it is in the midst of adversity that we learn to rely on God. It is when we deal with adversity that we are most open to God's guidance and love. Paul knew this, which is why he wrote in Romans 8:38-39 – "I am convinced that...nothing can separate us from the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ."

Now sometimes we feel God's presence in the midst of our storms and sometimes we don't. Perhaps as you deal with your own adversity you struggle to feel God's presence. Maybe you are frustrated because you are doing all the right things – praying, worshipping, reading the Bible – and you still don't feel the power of God's presence. Well, it doesn't mean that God is not present with you. Sometimes we don't see God's rainbow for us until after the storm.

I know this to be true in my own life. It was only after the storm, looking back, that I recognized God's abiding presence in the midst of my adversity. There was the advice I received here and a nudge there, a door that opened here and defining moment there. I saw the rainbow from behind.

All of us are familiar with that famous poem "Footprints" that is on about 2 billion refrigerators right now. The author complains that when life is good there are two sets of footprints in the sand. The Lord is walking with him. But during the most difficult times there is only one set of footprints. The author wonders where the Lord is. Then there is the reply from the Lord, "It is during the most difficult times in your life that I am carrying you."

Once upon a time there were two brothers who found out that a circus parade was coming to town. They ran to town to see it. The two of them could not see over the crowd, so one knelt behind a fence and watched through a hole. The other brother went up on the roof of a house to watch the parade go by. The one who watched through a hole in the fence saw the ringmaster go by. Then he saw the clowns go by. Then he saw a ferocious tiger. He was afraid because he thought the tiger was going to eat the ringmaster and the clowns. He couldn't see the tiger was in a cage. He didn't see that the ringmaster and the clown were protected from danger.

The other brother who was on top of the house could see the big picture. He saw the whole parade. He knew everything was going to be alright (story told by Dr. Robert Kopp).

Have faith in God in the midst of your storm. One day you will see the rainbow. You will see the big picture and discover that you were not defeated or devoured because God was carrying you.

Always, always look for the Rainbow! Amen.